Name From a Hat Trick
L.A.Witt

NAME FROM A HAT TRICK

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Name From a Hat Trick

First edition

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Cover Art by Lori Witt

Editor: Leta Blake

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ISBN: 978-1-64230-089-5

Paperback: 979-8-65210-792-5

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ABOUT NAME FROM A HAT TRICK

He's a hockey star. And he's my daughter's hero. And now he's…my boyfriend??

When Jase Kelly scores his fourth professional hat trick, it's more than just a career highlight. In one of the hats raining down onto the ice, there's a note from two fans—a girl whose migraines keep her from coming to games, and her dad, who hopes to get her an autograph for her birthday.

Devin McKenzie just hopes for a signature or maybe a chance for his daughter to meet her favorite player. Instead, Jase Kelly pulls out all the stops to give Dallas an evening of hockey, autographs, and all the souvenirs she can carry. She's beyond starstruck. And Devin? Being starstruck wouldn't make his heart race like this…would it?

Jase only wanted to cheer up a fan. He never expected to be so attracted to her dad. One look at Devin, though, and he's speechless. And suddenly a lot more certain than he's ever been about his sexuality.

Once they connect, they're so good together it's almost effortless… as long as Jase keeps Devin from seeing how the slightest bit of stress—or even nothing at all—can reduce him to shaking and hyperventilating. Meanwhile Devin desperately hopes that this *one* time, he's found

someone who won’t bolt from the reality of dating a parent of a child with chronic health issues.

They won’t be able to keep those cards hidden forever, though. Sooner or later, their respective truths will come to light.

Fate brought them together. Can love save them from falling apart?

Name From a Hat Trick is a 114,000-word standalone contemporary M/M romance.

CW: on-page anxiety and panic attacks

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CHAPTER 1

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JASE

THE SECOND I HIT THE PUCK, I SWORE; THERE WAS NO WAY THAT shot was going in. There were too many players from both teams between me and the goal.

Hoping for a rebound, I skated to the right and—

The goal horn sounded. The entire stadium roared.

I whipped around, and my jaw dropped. The glass behind the goal lit up red. Driving the point home were the flashing red letters on the reader board that ringed the entire stadium between the top and middle levels: *GOAL!*

It went in? Holy shit—it went in!

It was my third goal of the game, so hats immediately started raining down on the ice as the reader board alternately flashed *GOAL* and *HAT TRICK*. A baseball cap hit my shoulder and bounced off, and I gave the cheering fans a wave as I skated toward the bench to high-five my team.

"Good one, Kelly!" Maddox smacked my glove. "Think you can get in another before the end?"

"Me?" I laughed. "How about you pull some weight?"

"Fuck you!"

I chuckled. Maddox had scored the Snow Bears' other goal tonight. The Ice Foxes only had two, and we were almost to the end of the second period. As long as we kept our shit together (something we were kind of notorious for

not doing in the third period) we'd have this game in the bag.

I still couldn't believe the puck had even gone in. Were the officials sure that was a goal? And that no one else had touched it? Because that would suck, having my hat trick yanked after the fact when, on review, someone realized what had looked like my goal had actually been an assist.

While stadium staff collected the hats littering the ice, I craned my neck to watch the Jumbotron for the replay. On the screen, I hit the puck, and in slow motion, it passed between the skates of a distracted defenseman, just missed someone else's stick, and—in a split second where the goalie was anticipating the shot from his left—it slid under his leg and into the net.

No one else had touched it. The goal was mine, and so was the hat trick.

"Man, I can't believe that went in," Kuznetsov said as we skated toward center ice.

"I didn't think it was going to." I shook my head. "Guess I was lucky no one was paying attention."

"Yeah, well," Maddox said, "they're probably gonna be paying attention now."

He had a point. The Ice Foxes were one of those teams that was well-known for making stupid mistakes, but only making them once (per game, anyway). By now, they all knew damn well how they'd let that goal go, and they'd have their guard up for the rest of the game.

Fine by me.

We'd beaten them on their A-game before, and we'd do it again.

~

"Special delivery for tonight's MVP." Scott, one of our trainers, plunked the third of three huge cardboard boxes

in front of me as I unlaced my skates, and a few hats tumbled onto the floor. “When you’re done with them…” He waved a hand. “Eh, I don’t care. They’re not my problem anymore.”

I laughed as he walked away, and I glanced at the mountain of hats overflowing the boxes. The stadium would hang on to most of them for a couple of weeks in case a fan wanted to reclaim a lost favorite, but that happened so rarely, they usually went ahead and let us paw through them first. Some of the guys liked taking them all home. Some just wanted any that were unique or weird. My tradition was to take exactly one and add it to my collection (this would be the fourth hat on that shelf). Of course if someone called the stadium and it turned out they wanted their hat back, then we’d give it back, but that had literally never happened in the eight seasons I’d been playing professional hockey. Whatever hats were left would be donated to one charity or another.

First things first, I needed to strip out of my gear and shower. Partly because I was sweaty as hell, partly because I needed that post-game ritual to bring myself down. In the hours leading up to a game, I was always a jittery, nauseated wreck, and only the adrenaline of the game itself kept that jitteriness from fucking me up on the ice. Once the game was over and the adrenaline was gone, I had to take some time to pull myself together before I crashed. Lesson learned the hard way.

Once I’d showered, calmed down, and changed into something that didn’t smell like tonight’s game, and once the reporters had cleared out of the locker room, I sat down on the bench to start going through the hats.

“Anything good?” Andersson dropped onto the bench beside me. “Anybody send you panties this time?”

“Guess we’ll see.” That had been my first hat trick. In between all the hats, someone had tossed in a pair of blue lace panties. Five seasons later, I still hadn’t heard the end

of it, and it always came up if someone got a hat trick. Especially if that someone was me.

“Maybe you got a jock strap this time,” Collier suggested.

“Yeah, maybe.” I looked up at him, grinning. “If I did, I’ll give it to you so you can wear something clean for a change.”

“Oooh,” the other guys chimed in.

Collier just rolled his eyes.

I took another hat from the box and was about to set it aside. It was just a generic Snow Bears hat—there were always a few dozen of those—but it felt different. Like it was… unbalanced somehow. Curious, I turned it over, and a folded piece of paper had been clipped to the inside.

That was definitely new, though fans did find all kinds of innovative ways to give us notes and little gifts. Before the arena had cracked down on security, it was pretty much a daily thing to find a couple of notes under my windshield wiper blades.

Tucked into a hat after a hat trick? Definitely new.

Not every message I received was particularly friendly or flattering, though, and ever since one of the guys on another team got some death threats three seasons ago, I’d had a flicker of dread whenever I opened something like this. I’d had some messages from assholes who wanted me to know I was the worst forward they’d ever seen, that I should go back to Missouri and let the professionals play hockey, and a few comments that didn’t need to be repeated speculating about my sexuality.

Heart pounding the way it always did when I had a letter or a note, I carefully tugged the paper free from its clip inside the hat.

It was a single sheet of lined paper, and on it were two notes—one in what was definitely a kid’s handwriting, the other an adult. I paused to wipe my suddenly sweaty palms on my jeans, then read the kid’s half of the note:

Dear Jase Kelly,

I'm 11 and I'm a big fan of you and the Snow Bears. For my birthday, I'd really like an autograph, but I can't come to games. :(Is there any way I can get one?

Your biggest fan,

Dallas McKenzie

I stared at the note for a moment. I was relieved it wasn't hate mail or a death threat, of course, but the request definitely had my attention. An autograph? Hell, yeah. Any time a kid wanted one, the answer was yes, no questions asked. A kid who was a fan but couldn't come to games? Definitely, yes. But where would I send it? I read on.

Dear. Mr. Kelly,

As you can see, my daughter is a big fan. She has two Kelly jerseys and watches Snow Bears games religiously. We live locally, but because of some medical issues, coming to a game is impossible. Still, it would mean the world to her if she could meet you or if I could get my hands on a personalized autograph for her.

Please let me know if anything can be arranged.

Thank you from your biggest fan's dad,

Devin McKenzie

Below that was an email address and a phone number.

I got requests for autographs all the time, and everyone on the team routinely visited children's hospitals and charities, so it wasn't entirely out of the ordinary. This was the first time one of those requests had come to me this way, though—attached to a hat tossed on the ice with no way of knowing if it would actually reach me. Or if they'd ever get the chance to throw it in the first place. Hat tricks weren't exactly an everyday thing.

It seemed like an overly complex way to reach out to me, but none of us made our email addresses public, and the hockey club or our managers handled correspondence. They passed on fan mail pretty frequently, but a lot of it got

lost in the shuffle, too. Some fans had told us at signing events and open practices that they'd sent us letters or emails, but never heard back, and we'd been after the relevant staff to stop filtering things quite so stringently. Maybe Dallas and Devin had tried to contact me that way, but the message never got through.

Well, either way, I had their contact information now.

And I would definitely be sure Dallas got an autograph for her birthday.

THE MORNING AFTER THE GAME, I TOOK OUT THE LETTER AND fired up my laptop.

Dear Mr. McKenzie,

I found your note inside the hat last night and wanted to reach out regarding your daughter's birthday gift. I would be happy to arrange to meet her. The team is going on the road tomorrow and won't be back until the 20th, but after that, I'm sure we could schedule something. Let me know.

Thank you for the hat.

Jase Kelly

I read over the email a couple of times, then sent it and got up to make a cup of coffee. My mind stayed with the email, though. Even after eight seasons, it was still surreal to *have* fans at all, let alone fans who would put any real effort into meeting me or getting my signature on something. I was a midwestern farm boy who had turned out to be good at chasing a puck around on the ice, and ever since I'd been drafted into the league, my world had been completely different from anything I'd imagined while growing up.

Even after those league paychecks had started coming in (and clearing!), I still hadn't given up the two-bedroom condo I'd had since moving to the city. I mean, I liked the

place anyway, but I just couldn't stomach the idea of throwing down the kind of cash my teammates did for huge houses in exclusive neighborhoods. Though I was better than I'd been in my early years, I was still convinced this was all going to be taken away at any moment. The money, the jersey, the contract—someone was going to realize I was just me, and then I'd be out on my ass and probably on my way back to Missouri. At least I owned my car and condo free and clear.

My email pinged, and I almost dropped my coffee. When I checked the screen, sure enough, I had an email from Devin McKenzie.

Mr. Kelly,

Thank you so much for the reply! Having her meet you would be great. I don't really know how these things work, like where or at what kind of event she could meet you. The problem is that she has difficulty with bright lights, strong smells, and loud noise, not to mention crowds. That's why she can't go to games—those things trigger severe migraines. She has tried coming to team events as well, but those have never worked for the same reasons. So if I'm not pushing my luck by asking, is there any event coming up that will be more low-key?

Thank you again,

Devin

Ah, so the lights and sounds were the problem? Plus crowds? In fact, now that I thought about it, I wasn't even surprised. Games were loud as hell, and the stadiums always had flashing lights, strobes, flickering ads—if they were painful for me when I was dumb enough to show up hungover to a game, they had to be torture for someone prone to migraines. And smells, I could see that—even from the ice, I could usually smell the hot dogs, popcorn, and pizza.

Devin,

That sounds miserable for her. I think we can come up with something.

I paused, reading and rereading Devin's email and my own half-written response. I glanced at the note they'd stapled inside the hat.

And then I had an idea.

My teammates were always organizing things for fans, especially young fans. Hockey players in general had an enormous soft spot for kids, and most of the guys were involved in at least one or two organizations that helped kids or provided fun activities for those battling serious illnesses. During the off season, Kuznetsov always had kids from one of the cancer treatment centers come shoot goals with him. The charity that Jameson and Collier ran arranged visits to the local children's hospital a few times a year. I went to those events whenever I could. Didn't matter how big or small an event was—if it was for kids and/or charity, I was there.

For a long time, I'd wanted to organize something myself, but I'd always been overwhelmed by the logistics and the pressure of making sure nothing went awry. Just thinking about it now made my heart start racing and my palms start sweating. Two years ago, I'd casually pitched an idea to the Public Relations department, and then had literal nightmares for a week about all the ways it could go wrong. Needless to say, it never got off the ground.

Putting together something for a group of fans intimidated the hell out of me.

But what if I could make it happen for *one* fan?

Smiling to myself, I finished the email to Devin:

Let me work something out. I'll get back to you ASAP.

Jase

After I'd sent that, I opened a group chat with my teammates.

Hey guys – I want to do something for a fan.

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CHAPTER 2

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DEVIN

Crawling through the afternoon pick-up line at my daughter's school, I couldn't help smiling to myself. The closer I got to the front of the line, the harder it was not to just start laughing because I was so ridiculously excited. After two weeks of working out logistics, I couldn't wait to see the look on Dallas's face when she found out where we were going this evening. It was going to be a seriously late birthday present—she'd turned twelve three months ago—but it wasn't like I could plan for a hat trick. Somehow I didn't think she'd mind.

Finally, I made it to the front of the line, and she got into the backseat, dropping her heavy bookbag on the other seat.

"Hey, kiddo," I said. "How was your day?"

"Good." She pulled on her seat belt, pausing to give me a wary look. "What are you all smiley about?"

"Nothing."

"Uh-huh." The seat belt clicked, and as I started pulling away from the curb, she added, "You're never in this good a mood after work. Did your boss quit or something?"

"Pfft. I wish." Facing the road, I stole a quick glance in the rearview. "So, we're going to swing by home, but then we have to head back out in like fifteen minutes."

"For what?"

The grin could not be suppressed. “We’re going to a small Snow Bears signing event.”

“A signing—” She gasped. “Oh my God. Are you serious?”

I nodded. “And I *may* have scored you some VIP access.”

“You’re lying, Dad. You’re *lying*.”

“Not lying.” I picked up a piece of paper off the passenger seat and handed it back to her.

She skimmed over it quietly, then smothered what sounded like a squeak. “A private signing event with select Snow Bears players, *including Jase Kelly*?” The paper crinkled slightly as if she were gripping it for dear life. “This has to be a joke.”

I shook my head. “Not a joke. When Kelly got the hat trick a couple of weeks ago, he found your note inside the hat, and there was also a note from me asking if we could get you into one of these events. He’s been emailing back and forth with me, and—”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. *Dad*. You’ve been emailing. Back and forth. With Jase Kelly.”

“Mmhmm.”

“For two weeks.”

“For two weeks.”

Stunned silence came from the backseat for a moment, followed by, “Oh my God, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want to ruin the surprise!” Okay, truth was, I didn’t want to disappoint her. I’d still barely been able to believe he’d reached out in the first place. Even now that we were dozens of emails deep into a thread arranging everything for tonight, I still couldn’t believe it whenever my desktop alert said I had an email *from Jase Kelly*.

“Ugh. I can’t believe you’ve been talking to him.” She paused and, with a wicked laugh, asked, “Did you manage to keep from fanboying him?”

Well, it helped that it was all via email so he couldn’t see *me fanboying.*

I cleared my throat. “Excuse me, I will have you know I behaved like a perfectly dignified father trying to arrange a nice birthday present for his daughter.”

“And you never once let it slip that—”

“Listen here, kid.” I wagged a finger at her in the rearview. “You let that slip tonight, and I will show him pictures and videos on my phone.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Try me.”

Silence hung between us for a moment before we both chuckled.

“Okay, fine,” she said. “I won’t tell. But I probably won’t have to.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Dallas snorted. “Oh my God, Dad. You have no chill when you’re around someone you think is cute, and Jase Kelly is *famous* cute.”

My cheeks burned, and all it took was a glance in the rearview to confirm that, yes, I was blushing.

She giggled. “See? Told you.”

“Uh-huh.” I rolled my eyes. “You know, it’s not too late to cancel tonight if—”

“No! No! And you’re… I mean, you’re serious.” She held up the paper. “This is legit? We’re really going to meet Jase Kelly?”

I nodded. “I don’t know how many other players will show up, but he promised me like ten times that he will absolutely be there.”

“Oh my God.” She went quiet for a moment, then softly asked, “Do, um… do you know how many people will be there? Besides players, I mean?”

“All I know is it’ll be a small crowd,” I said. “Like, a really small crowd. It’s probably one of those low-key events like the one at the collectibles shop last year.”

Dallas exhaled with obvious relief. We’d tried to go to signing events before, but they’d almost always ended up

being too loud and crowded for her, or some asshat would wear a strong fragrance (who the fuck wore perfume to a hockey event and why did they always end up near us?). We'd gotten lucky last year with a shop that had booked a couple of the newer players on a day that coincided with some other event, so only about a hundred people had come. That had still been rough for Dallas—mostly from the crush of everyone trying to get into the shop at once—but she'd made it through and met the players without much incident.

But that had been a fluke. All the other events were huge, packed, and loud. Even open practices had ended badly for her enough times that we didn't try anymore. No matter how much she wanted to meet her favorite players, especially Jase Kelly, it wasn't worth the inevitable aftermath. Her doctors were still trying (as much as my shit insurance allowed, anyway) to find the right medication and dosage so she could get through situations like that without triggering an episode, but so far, not much luck. Her current meds were better than nothing and could sometimes stave off the migraine before it really got started, but not enough for her to attend things like concerts or hockey games. It was entirely possible she'd never be able to go to either.

Leading up to this evening, Jase had asked tons of questions about what triggered her migraines, and he'd reassured me time and again that he'd make sure tonight wouldn't be too much for her. One of his teammates' wives was prone to migraines with similar triggers, so he'd consulted with her too.

I promise, he'd written this afternoon, *we'll make sure she has fun and doesn't wind up in pain*.

Fortunately, even though stress was a trigger for Dallas, this kind of stress—excitement—didn't bother her. She'd take one of her meds before we left, and I'd keep my

fingers crossed that Jase and I really had covered all our bases for this evening.

Just let her enjoy the event and meet her hero this one time.

That isn't asking too much, is it?

THERE WAS NO GAME TONIGHT, SO THE STADIUM PARKING LOT WAS deserted. I had literally never imagined parking this close to the front door. Especially not for two bucks.

"Will he think we're dorks since we're both wearing Kelly jerseys?" Dallas asked on the way in.

"Is that going to stop us from wearing them?"

She giggled. "Nope. Not at all."

I chuckled as we kept walking. Money was tight, but Dallas's mom, stepdad, and I had scraped together enough to buy her one of the special edition Jase Kelly jerseys during last season's playoffs. She rarely wore it because she didn't want to ruin it, but she had it on tonight. I had on my regular season jersey. Yeah, maybe we looked like dorks, going to meet the man while we were both wearing his jerseys, but the jig was already up—he knew we were both big fans.

"This place looks weird when it's empty," Dallas mused as we walked toward the arena doors.

"It really does." I pushed open the door. "It's much quieter, though."

"*So* much quieter."

Inside the cavernous lobby, which was usually teeming with people in royal blue and white on game nights, a man in a suit started toward us, extending his hand. "Mr. McKenzie?"

"Uh, yes?" I shook his hand.

“It’s just a formality,” he said, almost apologetically, “but can I confirm that with an identification?”

I took out my wallet and showed him my driver’s license.

“Perfect.” The man smiled. “I’m Richard, and I’ll be taking you to your event. And this must be our birthday girl, Dallas?”

Nodding, my daughter shyly returned the smile.

“Well, happy birthday. And you’re right on time.” Richard motioned in the direction he’d come from. “If you’ll follow me, please.” Dallas and I exchanged glances, shrugged, and followed him. He led us farther into the stadium, saying over his shoulder, “There’s a more direct route, but Mr. Kelly told us the young lady is sensitive to fluorescent lights, so we’re going to take a slightly longer walk to avoid them.”

“Oh. Uh,” Dallas said. “Thank you. That’s awesome of him.”

“Yeah, thank you,” I echoed. “We really appreciate the consideration.”

“Absolutely.” Richard glanced back at us, smile still firmly in place. “Mr. Kelly has been very thorough in checking every detail. None of the stadium concessions are open tonight, so there shouldn’t be any issues with smells.”

Dallas and I glanced at each other again, and she looked as surprised as I was.

“How many other people are coming?” I asked.

“Oh, this is a private event,” he said.

“Right, but that’s—”

“Wait,” Dallas said. “You mean, ‘private’ like it’s just me and my dad?”

“That’s exactly right.” He stopped in front of a door, swiped a badge, and then continued through it.

Dallas followed, and at the end of a short tunnel, she gasped. Then I did.

We were on the ground level of the arena.

The empty arena.

Well, empty except for two goals set up on the freshly-surfaced ice. Above that, the clock on the Jumbotron showed 10:00 beneath huge glowing letters that read: *Welcome Dallas McKenzie*.

Her jaw fell open. “Whoa.”

“Uh-huh,” I murmured. What in the world did Kelly have up his sleeve? Because I’d come here expecting a low-key signing with a handful of people. An empty arena with my kid’s name on the Jumbotron? That was unexpected.

Richard turned to Dallas. “How is this lighting for you?”

She looked around, then shrugged. “It’s fine. It’s the flashing lights and strobes that bother me when I’m in here. This is good.”

“You sure?”

She nodded.

With a smile, Richard started down the steps and beckoned for us to follow. “Perfect. Come with me.”

He led us all the way to the row behind the home team bench. “Have a seat.”

We glanced at each other again, shrugged, and took a couple of seats behind the bench.

Then Richard took a radio out of his pocket. “Tell Mr. Kelly his guests are seated.”

“His *guests*?” Dallas stared at me. “I thought this was a signing event.”

“So did I.” I turned to Richard. “What am I—”

But the sounds of heavy footsteps below us turned my head, and I looked just as a player in Snow Bears gear emerged from the chute and skated out onto the ice.

Dallas gasped. My teeth snapped together.

That wasn’t just any player in Snow Bears gear. Not with that distinctive sway of his shoulders when he skated or the way he held his stick. Definitely not with the number 22 emblazoned on the back of his jersey beneath KELLY.

“Dad…” Dallas leaned forward. “Oh my God…”

“I know, right?” I whispered, fumbling with my phone.

Kelly skated a small circle, and he seemed to be taking a few deep breaths before he came back toward us, and jersey or not, I'd have recognized that face anywhere. The vaguely wavy dark hair that curled around the edges whenever he was sweaty and disheveled during a game. That asymmetrical smile that short-circuited my brain. Those dark eyes that would probably kill me if I ever saw them up close.

Holy shit.

Yeah. That was Jase Kelly. All not-quite-six-feet of him.

"Dallas?" he called up to her, voice echoing in the otherwise empty stadium.

Eyes wide and jaw slack, my daughter nodded.

He leaned on the boards in front of the team's empty bench. "I'm gonna get you that autograph I promised, but I thought you might want to watch some hockey first. You good with that?"

She nodded again, still mute.

His expression turned a little serious as he gestured overhead. "And the lights? They're good?"

"They're good," she called back, her voice hollow as if she were dazed. She probably was. God knew I was.

"And the noise?" He cocked his head. "If we're playing…? Ref whistles? Things like that? It can get kind of loud when we hit pucks and stuff."

"Yeah. Yeah, that's fine."

"All right." He looked down the chute and tapped his stick against the boards a couple of times.

Instantly, there were more footsteps and noise, and a second later, more hockey players emerged from the chute. Some were in the dominantly white home jerseys, others—including Kelly—wore the mostly blue away jerseys, and two referees followed them.

Those dressed for home went left, those dressed for away went right, and my lips parted when I realized what

was happening—the Snow Bears had divided themselves into two teams, and they were getting ready to play.

"Dad." She felt around and then grabbed my wrist. "This is real, right?"

"Uh-huh." I blinked a few times as I tried to hold my phone steady. "Yeah, it's real."

And holy shit, it was. While Dallas watched and I videoed, the players faced off at center ice. The clock on the Jumbotron started, and suddenly the Snow Bears were playing for nobody except us. There were no flashing ads, no strobe lights, no roaring fans, no overwhelming noise or strong smells to drive Dallas into a miserable night. Hockey wasn't, by its nature, a quiet sport, but this was a volume level she could handle. Players hitting pucks, calling out to each other, and occasionally slamming into each other and the glass wasn't the same degree of loud that triggered her migraines. The nonstop barrage of noise from a roaring crowd was too much for her. This? Not so bad as long as she wasn't subjected to it for hours on end.

They were also quite clearly playing at *maybe* eighty percent, if that. Practice intensity, I suspected, and likely for their benefit more than anything. Fine by me—the very fact that they'd done this at all for my kid was blowing my mind. I wasn't going to quibble over them not playing like this was a Cup final.

Especially since these *were* professional hockey players—even dialed back intensity didn't exactly mean a boring game. They were all just a little too competitive to not try to win. The puck went back and forth at breakneck speed, and no one was giving away goals. In fact they were almost four minutes into the game before someone finally slipped the puck past a goalie, scoring a point for the "away" team. The intensity ratcheted up after that, too—a minute later, the "home" team scored. They still kept it dialed back enough to, I assumed, avoid injuries and muscle strain, but

there was only so much professional athletes were going to hold back even in a friendly competition.

Dallas grinned bigger than I'd seen in a long time as she watched from the edge of her seat. "Think we'll see any fights?"

I chuckled. "Don't hold your breath, kid. They do have a real game coming up."

"Pfft. They're hockey players. One fight won't mess them up."

I just laughed and shook my head.

The teams managed to tie up the score with two points apiece when time ran out. I was briefly disappointed, thinking it was over too soon, but one of the refs blew a whistle, and the teams switched sides. They all paused to let some arena employees shovel the snow off the ice, and then the clock read 10:00 again, and the teams faced off at center ice.

When all was said and done, they played two ten-minute periods, and the "away" team—Kelly's team—won by a single goal. The players skated toward the bench, led by Kelly.

"Now you got to see some hockey!" he called out with a grin.

"I did! Thank you!" She paused, then added in a playfully pouty voice, "But I didn't get to see any fights!"

Without missing a beat, Jameson, one of the defensemen, gave Collier a sideways shove. Collier wasn't expecting it, and with a yelp of surprise, tumbled into Andersson, and they both toppled onto the ice in a flurry of "what the hell?" and "damn it, asshole!"

Jameson gave Dallas a thumbs-up and a big shit-eating grin.

Dallas howled with laughter. "Oh my God, I want to be like them when I grow up."

I snorted. "I think step one is to not grow up."

"Ooh, perfect."

As the players disappeared into the locker room, Richard reappeared beside us and smiled again. “Would you come with me, please?”

We got up and started to follow him, but Dallas looked back at the rink with a wistful sigh. “Man, that was fun. I wish it wasn’t over already.”

“Oh, don’t worry.” Richard glanced at her. “It’s not.”

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CHAPTER 3

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JASE

Unlike an actual game, we weren't bombarded with reporters in the locker room. Everyone took off their gear, showered, and dressed again, though we dressed casually instead of putting on suits like we usually wore to and from games. I didn't really have time for my usual winddown, but I didn't need it tonight like I did after a real game. Especially since the part that had me jittery and nervous right now wasn't the hockey we'd just played. It was everything Richard from Public Relations and I had planned for afterward.

I was beyond relieved that everything was going smoothly, especially since it had ended up being a bigger deal than I'd planned. Once my teammates had gotten onboard, and I'd casually suggested we play a scrimmage or two for her, things had sort of snowballed, and now here we were. The guys had all been enthusiastic, PR had been game, and suddenly "let's let her come to a closed practice" had evolved into this. I'd barely slept last night because, oh God, there were so many ways it could end in disaster, but…so far, so good.

Please, please, let it all go down without a hitch.

Should we have done more?

Goddamn, we should've done more.

Well, too late now.

Once my teammates and I were presentable and didn't smell like we'd just played a real game, we started heading up to the club level where Richard had taken the McKenzies.

On the way, there was plenty of shit-talking about "if we'd been playing for real, you never would've gotten that puck away from me" and "dude, if we'd been playing for real, I'd have punched you in the face and *taken* the two minutes for roughing," but it was good-natured. The guys had all seemed to enjoy the informal game. I'd actually been surprised that so many of them had been onboard, though I really shouldn't have been. Everyone on this team was involved in charity work and did all kinds of things for kids, so when I'd told them we had a fan who desperately wanted to come to a game, but couldn't, they'd all jumped at the chance to let her see some Snow Bear hockey.

Now that the game was over and we were headed up to meet her, they were bantering and trash-talking as always, but I didn't join in this time. I was too focused on where we were going and who we were there to see. Tonight had been occupying my brain ever since I'd found Dallas and Devin's note, and now that it was all underway, I couldn't shake the nagging worry that it wasn't enough. Maybe because hockey had been my life since I was old enough to skate, and it was hard to fathom not even being able to go to a game. I couldn't imagine what it would take to fill that void.

Then again, maybe everything we were doing tonight really *was* over the top. Dallas probably had hobbies and interests outside of hockey, and not being able to go to a game was frustrating, but not as crushing as it would've been for me. Was this all too much? And… No, really, was it *enough?*

Or maybe I just couldn't do anything without overthinking the shit out of it. This was exactly why I hadn't spearheaded any other events before this one. Last

night had been hours of restless sleep and dreams of how many ways tonight could possibly go wrong. Not unusual—instead of dreaming about missing flights or not having my gear at a game, I'd dreamt that I'd given Devin the wrong date, or that I couldn't get to the arena, or that my teammates hadn't shown up, or—

As subtly as I could, I took a few slow, deep breaths. No need to get worked up. Everything was going smoothly so far. As my teammates and I followed the winding hallway up toward the club level, I just focused on breathing so I didn't freak myself out. Overthinking everything *was* on-brand for me. Always had been anyway, and it had been ten times worse since my ex and I had broken up a couple of years ago. Especially in situations like this because nothing had ever been good enough, big enough, thoughtful enough, shiny enough, expensive enough for her. From our relationship onward, I'd never been able to shake the feeling that nothing I did or was could ever be good enough for anyone.

Thanks, Lila. Because I didn't already lose enough sleep over shit like that.

"Hey, Kelly." Kuznetsov fell into step beside me and pulled me out of my thoughts. "There have got to be other kids who can't come to games for the same reason as her, you know?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know, the ones who want to come to games, but can't? Because of…" He tapped his temple. "We do all kinds of things for kids who are in the hospital or too sick to come to games, but I never realized there were kids like her."

I grimaced. "Yeah, me neither. I never even thought about a game being sensory overload until her dad contacted me."

"Hmm. Maybe we should see if there's more." Kuznetsov gestured over his shoulder. "The front office would let us do

this again, yeah?”

I almost stumbled. “You think we should?”

“Why not?” He shrugged. “If we’ve got other fans who can’t come to games for the same reasons she can’t, we should do something for them too.”

Oh. Hell. Maybe I wasn’t overthinking this after all. The front office might not be down with going *quite* this all-out on a regular basis, though if we did it for more than one fan, they might. Could be worth a try; the PR guy was good at sweet-talking Coach Larson and Bill, our general manager, and to be fair, both of them *were* big old softies like we were, especially when it came to kids. I didn’t imagine they’d put up too much of a fight. Not if it meant hockey for kids who wanted to watch us play but couldn’t come to games. And if we could make some kind of fundraiser out of it…

“You’re right,” I said to Kuznetsov. “I’ll talk to Richard.”

“Good. If I can help, tell me.”

“I will. Thanks, man.”

I’d bring it up with Richard later, though, because we’d reached the club lounge where the McKenzies would be waiting. The lounge wasn’t huge, so we’d arranged to have a handful of players go in at a time rather than overwhelm our young fan with a crowd. That was fine by me anyway—I wasn’t prone to migraines like she was, but being crowded into a room with a lot of people, even my own teammates, made my skin crawl and my pulse race. I didn’t even like it when reporters came into our locker room, but it wasn’t something I could avoid, so I’d more or less learned to deal with it. Giving Dallas some space so we wouldn’t overwhelm her was the perfect smokescreen so I didn’t have to find an excuse to linger in the hallway until some of the other guys had cleared out. I casually waited out here with Kuznetsov and a few of our other teammates, and after some of the other guys left and there was more space in the lounge, we went in.

I immediately found Dallas. Even if she hadn't been wearing a jersey—one of my playoff jerseys, holy shit—she wasn't exactly difficult to spot, being the only kid in the room. I smiled to myself as she stared in starstruck awe at my teammates. I owed every last one of them a beer—not only were they signing everything I'd asked them to and posing for photos, they were taking the time to chat with her. And here I'd been worried about asking them to do any of this.

There was plenty to sign, too. I'd made sure Richard got her a jersey, some game-played pucks, a stack of photos, and a game-played stick, and the guys were going through and signing everything. Richard was dutifully taking photos of her with each player, too, so she'd have a pile of souvenirs after today.

The stick was getting a little crowded with signatures, and it was kind of funny watching Maddox and Jameson turning it every which direction in search of a blank spot to sign. Maddox apparently found a spot, and he turned the stick, smacking Jameson in the face with the blade.

"Really?" Jameson gingerly rubbed his nose.

"Sorry." Maddox didn't sound even a little bit sincere.

Jameson growled something. Then when it was his turn to sign the stick, he whacked Maddox in the shin with it, prompting a yelp and some cursing while Maddox hopped away. Dallas laughed hard, and Jameson just chuckled as he signed the stick.

Dallas was a cute kid. Eleven or twelve, I thought her dad had said, and she looked genuinely stunned by everything. Good. From what Devin had told me, she was a big fan, and she was crushed that she couldn't come to games, so I'd wanted to make up for that as much as I could. There was nothing I could do that would make an actual game doable for her, so I hoped this was enough to compensate.

If her wide eyes and gigantic smile were anything to go by, she was happy with what the guys and I had put together.

I hung back to let the rest of the team go through the line, and as I did, I searched the room for her dad. It only took a second to zero in on him, and I had to do a double take.

Holy…

I'd seen him in the stands, but now he was closer and in better light, and I did not expect him to be so… wow. Of all the ways this evening could play out—and God knew I'd spent an embarrassing number of hours running through *all* of them—the one I'd failed to consider was that the man on the other end of all those emails was smoking hot.

He also had on a Kelly jersey, which did wild things to my blood pressure. And he was watching his daughter with a huge smile on his full lips that only served to bring out his cheekbones and light up his blue eyes. Dallas had definitely gotten her blond hair from him, though his was closer to the platinum end of the spectrum than hers, and cut short and neat. He seemed narrow in the shoulders, but I was pretty sure that was just because he was standing a few feet away from three of our biggest defensemen. Hell, *I* looked small next to those guys.

And I was staring at a man, probably wearing *holy fuck he's hot* across my face, in a room full of teammates who didn't know I was… Well, they knew the rumors that I was gay thanks to my ex-girlfriend, but I wasn't out. I didn't even really know what the fuck I was except confused as hell, but then here was this ridiculously cute guy with amazing eyes and—

I quickly shifted my attention to the guys who were signing things for Dallas. She was chatting with Gagnon, our starting goalie, and she looked well and truly starstruck. Couldn't really blame her—the dude had been

on three different teams when they'd won the Cup. He was a fucking legend.

One by one, the guys signed things and posed for pictures with her, and afterward, they took off. Before I knew it, the room had nearly cleared out except for the McKenzies, Richard, plus Jameson and Palmquist, and a couple of defensemen still taking a picture with her.

When they got out of the way, Dallas turned, and the second she saw me, her eyes lit up. "Oh my God!" she squealed. "You're…"

Her dad laughed, which made my knees wobble a bit because, whoa, that man had a cute smile too. Oblivious to me, he said, "You didn't think he was going to bail, did you?" His eyes flicked toward me, and his eyebrows rose slightly as if he'd actually wondered if I might bail.

"No, I didn't," she said. "It's just… Holy shit."

"Dallas!" He was chuckling, though.

I came a little closer and grinned. "For the record, no, I definitely wasn't going to bail." I extended my hand. "It's nice to finally meet you."

She stared up at me with wide eyes as she shook my hand. "Can I… Um, can I…"

I inclined my head. "Hmm?"

She glanced at her dad as if she needed reassurance, then shyly met my eyes. "Can I hug you?"

"Of course!" I took another step, and though she was tiny, she just about bowled me over. I hugged her back, trying to steady us both at the same time.

"Thank you so much!" she said, still holding on. "Everything you guys did was awesome." Letting me go, she added, "I can't believe I finally got to watch the Snow Bears play. Like, *live*."

I smiled. "You're welcome. And happy birthday. I wish there was something I could do so you could come to the games, but…"

“This was *way* better than going to a game,” she said with a huge smile. Scanning everything the guys had signed, she laughed. “I don’t know where I’m going to put all of this.”

“I’m sure we’ll find a spot.” Devin’s voice was closer than before, and I damn near jumped when I turned to see him standing *right* beside me. Fortunately, he didn’t seem to notice. “If there isn’t room at our place, I’m sure your mom won’t mind you keeping a few things at hers.”

Dallas snorted and picked up a print of Gagnon doing a lap with the Cup over his head last season. “Think I should put this on Mom’s fridge?”

“I dare you,” Devin said.

Dallas must have seen the confusion on my face, because she clarified, “My stepdad *hates* Gagnon for ditching the Timberwolves.”

I laughed. “Oh, yeah. My brother hasn’t let me live that down either. I guess we did kind of steal him from them, didn’t we?”

“You didn’t really steal him,” Devin said. “They *did* get Holmes and…” His brow furrowed. “Who else was part of that trade?”

“Lansing.” I grimaced. “Losing him hurt, let me tell you. I’m glad we got Gagnon, but that still hurt.”

“Stupid salary caps,” Dallas muttered.

“Wow, you really do know the game, don’t you?”

She nodded. “Dad and I always talk about hockey.”

“Yeah?” I turned to Devin, and I’ll be damned if he didn’t blush.

“We, uh…” He cleared his throat. “It’s kind of our thing, I guess.”

“Hey, I’m not judging. It’s about all anyone talks about whenever I go home too.”

“I can imagine,” he said with a soft laugh. “I’ve always wondered what holidays must be like in your house.”

“Oh, they’re not bad.” I shrugged. “It was a little tense after Troy and I ended up facing each other in the playoffs, but Mom intervenes if it gets too heated.”

Dallas and her dad laughed, and once again, Devin’s smile did weird things to my pulse. The entire time he and I had emailed, it hadn’t occurred to me that he might be attractive, but now that we were in the same room, I kept losing my balance.

So about those rumors…

Richard cleared his throat, reminding me that he was still here, and he gestured with the camera. “Would you like a picture?”

“Definitely!” Dallas turned to her dad. “You should be in this one too, since he’s your favorite player.”

Devin’s eyes locked with mine, and some renewed pink rose in his cheeks. “I, uh…”

“We can fit all three of us.” I smiled. “Come on.”

He stammered a little, like he was flustered by his daughter’s comment, but then he shrugged and joined Dallas and me in front of the Snow Bears backdrop. Dallas put her arm around my waist, so I went to rest my hand on her shoulder… and brushed Devin’s arm in the process.

“Oh. Sorry.” I glanced at him. “Uh…”

“My bad. We, um…” He cleared his throat, and with a little more awkwardness, we got everyone comfortably situated. Richard snapped a few photos, and the three of us separated. I signed everything my teammates had already signed, plus a poster of me that Devin had said his daughter coveted. All too soon, Richard was tapping his watch and nodding toward the door.

As Richard helped Dallas arrange everything into bags, Devin turned to me and extended his hand. “Thank you again. We were just hoping for an autographed picture or something, but this has been amazing.”

Shaking his hand, I smiled. “Don’t mention it. I’m glad we could do something to make up for…” I motioned

toward the stadium, hoping that indicated the game and didn't give away that I'd basically lost my ability to speak because Devin's hand was in mine and he was looking right in my eyes.

"You went above and beyond." He released my hand and watched Richard and Dallas gathering the pucks, pictures, and shirts into bags. "*Way* above and beyond."

"I can't imagine not being able to watch hockey. Honestly, I was worried this wouldn't be enough."

Devin faced me again, eyes wide. "Not enough? Are you kidding?" He gestured at Dallas. "She's going to be talking about this for *months*."

"Really?"

"Oh, yeah. She was already a big fan of yours, but I'm pretty sure you've got a diehard fan for life."

I laughed quietly. "Well, I'm glad she's happy."

"She is." Lowering his voice a little, he added, "She's happier than I've seen her in a while, so I mean it—I can't thank you enough for this."

I met his gaze again, and I somehow didn't lose my capacity to speak: "You're welcome. Both of you. Just, um, let me know if there's anything else we can do. Anything to make a fan happy."

Devin just smiled.

And there went my balance again.

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CHAPTER 4

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DEVIN

We put all of Dallas's souvenirs in the trunk, then got in the car. We buckled our seat belts and I started the engine, but I didn't pull out of the spot yet.

Had that all really just happened? Had we just spent the evening with the Snow Bears, getting every possible piece of memorabilia signed while Dallas had her picture taken with each player, and all of that after they'd played a game just for her to watch? Had this all been real?

I looked in the rearview, and unsurprisingly, Dallas's expression was as dazed as I felt. "You okay, kiddo?"

She nodded. "Uh-huh. Just still kind of… I mean, I can't believe…"

"I know, right?" I rested my hands on the wheel and exhaled. "I thought it was just going to be a signing event. I had no idea they were going to do all that."

"Seriously." She shook herself. Then she grinned and met my gaze in the rearview. "Kelly was totally checking you out, by the way."

"What?" I coughed a laugh. "No, he wasn't."

"He was! I saw him do it like three times!"

I rolled my eyes, thankful the parking lot was mostly dark so she hopefully didn't see my cheeks coloring the way I knew they were. "He was not. And he's straight, remember?"

“Uh-huh. So they say.”

I met her gaze in the mirror again, and she arched an eyebrow. I shook my head and started backing out of the space. “Those are just rumors.”

“Yeah, but maybe they’re true.”

“Right. Because vindictive exes never make up things like that. And even if by some chance those rumors are true, I’m *pretty* sure he’s out of my league.”

“I know what I saw,” she said with the stubbornness she had absolutely gotten from her mother and not even a little bit from me. “He was totally checking you out.”

“No, he wasn’t. And by the way, thank you for telling him directly that he’s my favorite player. That wasn’t embarrassing at all.”

“Pfft. He was flattered. And he blushes almost as much as you do.”

I rolled my eyes. “He does not.”

“I *know* what I *saw*.”

“Uh-huh.” I headed for the parking lot exit. “Don’t you have friends to text about—”

“Don’t change the subject, Dad.”

I tsked, but let it go. She just giggled, and from the quiet tapping, she’d started texting her friends and probably posting some of her pictures on social media.

As I drove, I couldn’t stop thinking about the evening we’d just spent with the Snow Bears. And the truth was, I *had* caught a glimpse of Jase Kelly watching me, but I didn’t dare read anything into it. For one thing, he was *Jase Kelly*, and a man who’d dated supermodels could do better than an accountant who was up to his eyeballs in debt and could barely figure out Tinder.

For another, Kelly was straight, and I didn’t want to be one of those fans who started buying into the rumors about him being gay or bi. Because dear God, there were rumors.

Like a lot of people, I’d dismissed them as something started by Lila Spaulding and fueled by the tabloids

covering their explosive breakup. Hockey players didn't usually warrant that kind of attention, but he'd been dating a model-turned-actress who had been thrust into the spotlight after her most recent film had proven to be a blockbuster. She'd also pulled no punches talking about him and their split in interviews, never missing an opportunity to smear his name or drop hints about *all* the reasons she'd left him.

Some of those rumors persisted even now, and most of them revolved around the possibility of him being gay. One story was that his ex had left him for "a real man." Another was that she'd caught him in bed with—depending on who you asked—his coach, his college roommate, another of her ex-boyfriends, her brother, or a FedEx or UPS driver (or both at the same time). She'd painted him as a lying cheater who'd stomped all over her heart by shamelessly parading men through their bedroom.

For a long time, people had bought into her vitriol, and he'd even been booed a number of times by people who'd brought giant posters of her to wave at him during warm-ups and games. He'd dodged questions about her and their relationship, and he'd laughed off rumors that they'd broken up because he was gay. Eventually, people had begun to realize that his ex was using him and their breakup to keep the media focused on her, particularly after she tried to do the same thing to a subsequent ex-boyfriend. People figured out that Kelly and the new ex weren't the assholes she'd portrayed them to be, and things quieted down. Jase Kelly was back to being a star hockey player instead of a tabloid pariah.

It was hard for someone that high-profile to shake off rumors about his sexuality, though, and I had to wonder how that felt. What it was like to have people speculating publicly about who you had sex with, whether you were any good at it, and who you wanted to have sex with. I'd have been a ball of anxiety just listening to people's opinions

about my hockey skills. The minute they started in on who was in my bed or what was in my pants, I would have lost my mind.

Being a celebrity sounded like a living hell. Dating one sounded miserable.

So maybe I'd been imagining those looks tonight. Maybe I hadn't.

But I wasn't imagining how far I wanted to stay away from Jase Kelly's spotlight.

AFTER A FAST FOOD DINNER AT ONE OF THE FEW PLACES SHE could eat, Dallas and I brought all her souvenirs in from the parking garage. Our apartment was small, and we only had so much wall space. Some of it was reserved for things like school and family photos, plus a few decorative prints and things like that.

But hockey—in particular, Snow Bears hockey—dominated two walls and a couple of bookshelves in the living room.

While our black cat, Tony, supervised from a folded-up Snow Bears blanket, Dallas arranged her signed pucks—which were now in protective cases provided by the team's PR manager—on a shelf. I carefully removed an older poster from a frame so I could replace it with one of the new signed posters.

"Which one do you want up here?" I gestured at the bare spot on the wall. "We've got room for two of the team posters, or one player poster."

She thumbed through the stack and slid one free. "This one. Definitely." With a sly grin, she added, "Unless you'd be too embarrassed to have him on the wall?"

Of course, she'd picked a full-size shot of Jase on the ice. I wasn't sure I could handle having that man's face on my

wall under normal circumstances, but especially after tonight? Holy shit.

I was not, however, going to give my daughter the satisfaction of watching me shy away from putting up a damn poster. “All right.” I laid it on the coffee table. “Can you hold it still while I put it in the frame?”

She smirked, and there was definitely some warmth in my cheeks, but neither of us acknowledged it out loud. I hung up the poster, and we both stepped back to admire it.

Holy shit was right.

There was now a full-size signed poster of Jase Kelly in my living room. That wouldn’t fry my brain or anything.

Fortunately, my daughter didn’t make any more comments about it (this time). While she went into her bedroom to hang up a few more pictures—and probably to message her friends and her stepdad about how she’d spent the evening—I sat on the couch beside Tony and pulled my laptop onto my knee.

As soon as my email was open, my gaze went straight to the thread I’d had going with Kelly before tonight. I’d thanked him profusely before we’d left the event, and I didn’t want to pester him, but one email wouldn’t be too much, would it?

Nah, that wouldn’t be a big deal, so I typed out:

Thank you again for everything you did for Dallas this evening. It really meant the world to a kid who doesn’t usually get to see her favorite team play.

Best,

Devin

I was catching up on social media and smiling at the photos Dallas had uploaded via Instagram when my email pinged. Somehow, I was surprised—and yet somehow not—to have a response from Kelly.

I’m glad she enjoyed it. It was great to meet both of you. The team had fun too. Hopefully we can do it again.

Jase

Again? He wanted to do it again?

Dallas would definitely be onboard to do it again, but I didn't want to get her hopes up, so just like I had this time, I wouldn't say a word until something was actually scheduled. For now, I wrote back to Kelly, *That would be great. Dallas would love to see another game and meet the team again*. I somehow resisted the temptation to add *and so would I*.

A moment later, he replied, *I'll talk to the team. They had a blast*.

I had to suppress a sound that my daughter probably would have called a fanboy squeal. Even though there was no one in the room except for Tony, I needed to maintain at least some dignity. Plus Tony would judge me, and he already did enough of that.

I didn't want to get my hopes up that tonight was the first of multiple experiences with the Snow Bears.

I definitely didn't want to get Dallas's hopes up.

But oh, God, I really, really hoped tonight wasn't the last time we saw Jase Kelly.

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CHAPTER 5

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JASE

My morning routine usually consisted of waking myself up with a shower, pouring some coffee down my throat, and then making whatever breakfast I needed to get through my first workout of the day.

I didn't realize until this morning that my routine had changed slightly over the past couple of weeks. Instead of getting up and into the shower, I reached for my phone and checked my email. I'd been so focused on keeping a handle on last night's event, I'd needed to check my messages the second my eyes were open to make sure there were no fires to put out. More often than not, I had something from Devin—either one he'd sent before he'd gone to bed the night before or one from early that morning. Not a crisis or a fire, just one more in our ongoing thread of emails about logistics.

This morning, as I lounged in bed and scrolled through my email, I had plenty of messages, but none were from Devin. I wasn't surprised that he hadn't sent me anything else—the event was over and he'd thanked me and the team profusely for it—but I *was* kind of surprised by how much it disappointed me not to find a new email from him.

I showered. I made my coffee. I made some breakfast. As I ate, my thoughts kept drifting to my email inbox and the new message that hadn't been there. Was it weird that I

wanted to keep our conversation going? Probably. Then again, after the way my heart had gone wild the moment I'd laid eyes on him…maybe not.

But how to keep that line of communication open? I was the opposite of smooth with people I knew. Someone I didn't know and really *wanted* to know? Oh fuck. I'd come to the conclusion that those romantic comedy scenes with awkward dudes who have no idea what to say or do, and who only manage to fuck things up until they're complete disasters? I was the living breathing personification of every one of those scenes. *Combined*.

Sweat trickled down the back of my neck, and I batted it away. All right, this was stupid. I was not going to work myself up to sweating and hyperventilating over sending a stupid email to a guy. I'd faced down my ridiculous fear of putting together an event for fans by putting together an event for *one* fan, and damn it, I could send an email to an attractive man and see if I got one back.

I put down my fork and picked up my phone. Before I could talk myself out of it, I wrote, *How is Dallas enjoying her souvenirs? If there's anything else she'd like, let me know. I can hook her up.*

It wasn't the smoothest thing in the world, but it did give me an excuse to make contact, so I hit Send and hoped for the best.

Then I kept eating and…also hoped for the best because goddammit, did I really send him that email? Dallas had been thrilled with everything we'd signed for her. She and her dad had barely been able to carry it all. Come on. I couldn't think of anything even *slightly* smoother than that? Well, at least now I didn't have to worry about how to keep this line of communication open, because I was pretty sure he wasn't going to—

A soft ping turned my head, and the push notification on my phone almost made me choke on my eggs.

He'd responded.

I dropped my fork, grabbed the phone, and quickly opened my inbox, stomach roiling with certainty that he was going to say something like *Really, dude?*

To my surprise, he'd written: *Oh, she is loving everything. Her stepdad is jealous as hell.*

I laughed into the silence of my kitchen. *I hope he's not mad. I can probably find something for him too*.

In seconds, he replied, *You don't have to do that. You've already done a ton, and he and Dallas's mom are thrilled too. How did you get the entire team to play along? Not that they seemed like they needed any arm-twisting.*

Nah, not at all. They love doing stuff like this. Tell them it's something for kids, and they're all over it.

The emails kept going. With the logistics of last night out of the way, we just started chatting. After an hour or so, I told him I was logging off to go for a run, but would be back online in another hour.

When I came back, he'd responded, *I wish I could go for a run. It's gorgeous out*. Then he'd followed that with, *Damn it, I really want to go for a run. Do you have any idea how hard it is to concentrate on boring paperwork right now?*

I laughed as I wrote back, *I wouldn't be able to concentrate on boring paperwork anyway.*

Yeah, well, it's a lot more of a pain when I keep thinking about hockey and hanging out with hockey players.

LOL What do you do, anyway?

Ugh, I work in the accounting department of an electronics distributing company. It's exactly as boring as it sounds.

He followed that with, *Do you think if I stapled my hand to something, my boss would put me on injured reserve?*

I laughed again as I wrote, *I don't think that's how that works? But don't staple your hand*.

Fine. But let the record show that this sucks.

I responded. Then he did. Then I did again. And the emails just kept going. When the team left for a ten-day road trip later that week, he suggested we switch to texting, which we did, and the conversation kept going. We'd talk about my game on a given night. I'd ask about him and Dallas. He sent me a picture of his cat. I sent him one of Gagnon passed out on the bus with a dick drawn on his face in Sharpie, which Devin said nearly made him spit out his coffee.

A few days into the road trip, a migraine knocked Dallas off her feet. I'd kind of expected him to go dark, but after I returned to my hotel after the game, he was chatty.

How is she doing? I asked.

Just riding it out. The meds help, but she'll be miserable for the next 24 or so.

Jesus. That's rough.

It is. Thank God for these meds, though. It was a lot worse before.

Wow. Poor kid. Must suck in school.

Ugh. Attendance policy = my worst nightmare.

I bet.

Anyway. How has your night been?

Well, I could've done without the bloody nose, but otherwise all right.

Oh, fight or check?

Me? Fight? Come on now.

Please, dude. I've watched you play.

Fine. And for the record it was an accidental high stick.

Ouch!

It hadn't been so bad, but it seemed like it gave him a distraction from worrying about Dallas, so I ran with it and filled him in on the play-by-play and the gory details. He seemed to like the virtual company, too, so I stayed up a little later to keep talking to him.

And it was good for me too. Before the game, I'd had one of those godawful mental spirals where something had

kicked my brain into overdrive, and I'd suddenly been a sweaty, hyperventilating wreck. Now, long after I'd pulled myself together enough to play hockey, I was still off-balance. Talking to Devin was relaxing. Which was weird, considering it usually stressed me out like whoa to talk to someone I thought was attractive.

Maybe it was different because we couldn't see each other. Words on the screen were easy. There was a backspace button in case I said something stupid, and worst case scenario, I could blame some gaffs on autocorrect. So communicating this way was easy.

But still, I was seriously attracted to Devin. To a *man*. To the man who was somehow on the other end of these texts and emails and hadn't gotten sick of talking to me.

This was attraction, right? I'd never been into a guy before, and no one had ever had me checking my phone every twelve seconds like Devin did. What the hell did it even mean? Did it matter yet? I was enjoying it. It was calming me down even while it gave me something else to work myself up over, and it seemed to keep him happy while he was otherwise stressed out.

Ugh, why wasn't there a manual for this shit?

Right then, my phone pinged again.

Oblivious to me tying myself into knots over everything, Devin had sent a picture of Tony, who was currently contorted into a pretzel beside Devin's leg.

My cat is so dignified, Devin wrote.

And just like that, without even knowing he was the one who had my mind reeling like this, he made me laugh, which made me breathe, which made me calm down a little.

I wrote back, *LOL.*

But what I thought was, *What I wouldn't give to see you in person again*.

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CHAPTER 6

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DEVIN

Couldn't there be more guys like Jase on dating apps? Because if there were, I sure as hell hadn't found them.

I didn't even care if I was his type or in his league. He was nice to talk to. I hadn't even realized how much I'd missed having a companion or even a close friend who I could chat with at work or at home or whenever, even when we didn't have something in particular to discuss. He was thousands of miles away, and his company was a godsend.

While Dallas had been down with her migraine, he'd stayed online with me as long as he could (the dude was wiped and he had to sleep sometime). The next morning, he'd shot the shit with me while he'd waited for his plane. While he'd been in the air and we'd been incommunicado, it had been kind of jarring. The conversations had become so effortless and such a normal part of my day that I sometimes didn't know what to do with myself when he had to travel or when he was on the ice.

By the time the Snow Bears played again—this time in Chicago—Dallas had bounced back completely from her migraine, and we settled in to watch the game on TV. I put my phone aside since I obviously wouldn't be hearing from Kelly much for the next few hours, and just watched the game.

The first period had barely started when the camera zoomed in on him on the bench. The commentator was saying something about Kelly spending his first couple of seasons in Chicago before being traded to the Snow Bears, but I mostly tuned it out because I was busy staring at him. He was all focus now, brow furrowed and eyes intently fixed on something off-camera as he—like so many of the players did during downtime—played with his mouthguard between his teeth.

Then he put the mouthguard back in, swung his legs over the boards, and joined his team on the ice.

I sat back, staring as if this was the first time I'd ever noticed him. Seriously, how the hell was the guy on the other end of all these texts the same guy chasing a puck around on my screen? The same guy who'd featured in more than a few of my impure and improbable fantasies? How was this my life all of a sudden?

I wasn't sure.

But I definitely wasn't complaining.

Especially when, an hour or so after the game had ended, my phone pinged again.

DALLAS WAS AT HER MOM'S WHEN THE SNOW BEARS CAME BACK into town, so as I often did, I joined my brother downtown for a game. Eric was good at getting us last minute tickets near the glass without breaking the bank, and tonight was no exception. We were in the fifth row back behind the goal, which was about as close to perfect as you could get.

As always, we went all the way down to the glass for warm-ups, wedging ourselves in with the other fans who tried to get in close before the game started.

"So you and Dallas met the team?" Eric asked while we waited for warm-ups to start. "For real?"

I nodded. “Yeah. They even played a couple of periods so she got a chance to watch them. I’ll have to show you the video later.”

He whistled. “Damn. And you didn’t bring me?”

“Hey, I didn’t know it was going to be that wild. I just thought it was a private signing event.”

“Uh-huh. And you didn’t bring me?”

“Well, no.” I turned to him and grinned. “It was a family event.”

“Oh. Oh.” He put a hand to his chest. “That hurts, man. That really hurts.”

I gave his shoulder a hard pat. “You’ll be all right.”

“I’m telling Mom.”

“Go for it.” I shrugged. “Still doesn’t change the fact that Dallas and I got to—”

“You’re such a dick,” he said with a laugh.

I chuckled. Truth was, if I’d known what kind of event Dallas and I had been going to, I would have tried to finagle a spot for my brother too. He was a hardcore Snow Bears fan. In fact, he’d been the one to get me into hockey in the first place, and he’d been thrilled to find out his only niece was a hardcore fan as well. He was as devastated as I was that Dallas couldn’t come to games with us. So, yeah, if I’d known what I did now, I’d have brought him that night, and I was pretty sure he knew that. But we were brothers, so there was shit-talking. That was the way of the world.

The arena lights suddenly went dim, and everyone cheered because we knew what was next. As some fast techno blasted from the speakers, the opposing team came down their chute and out onto the darkened ice. A moment later, the lights came on, and a booming voice said, “Make some noise for your Snow Bears!” as players in royal blue and white jerseys shot into the arena. And as always, we made plenty of noise—the arena shook with the deafening cacophony of music and a roaring crowd.

Like any team, the Snow Bears had a warm-up routine that was superstitiously written in blood. Collier always came out onto the ice without his gloves on, then tucked his stick under his arm and pulled on his gloves while he skated along the boards. Gagnon always did some stretches, and he always fired a puck at Jameson for reasons they'd never explained. Kuznetsov shot right-handed during warm-ups even though he was a left-handed player. Anyone who'd been to warm-ups more than once or twice could pretty easily find a particular player just by knowing their pre-game routine.

Which meant it only took me a second to track down Jase Kelly, though somehow I was sure I could've zeroed in on him even if I didn't know his and every other player's routine by heart. Somehow, in ways I hadn't before, I just knew where he was.

And Lord, one glimpse of the number 22 on his back, and my heart went wild. There he was. I'd always gotten a little fluttery at the sight of him—what could I say, he was hot—but tonight it was even more intense. This wasn't just that player I'd ogled and cheered for. This was Jase Kelly, the guy who'd been emailing me and texting me multiple times a day for the past couple of weeks. The guy who'd put together an event for my daughter.

That wasn't just Jase Kelly. That was… Jase Kelly.

And my heart was going a million miles an hour.

Oblivious to me watching him, Kelly continued warming up with his team. As he always did, he fired a few shots at the goal, stretched a little, then skated a few relaxed circles around the Snow Bears' half of the ice. At one point, he skated past us and skidded to a stop beside Maddox, one of the wingers, just in front of the glass and not five feet away from where I was standing. Next to me, some kids banged on the glass and called out "Kelly! Kelly!" That wasn't unusual—everyone tried to get players' attention, especially during warm-ups.

As he often did, Kelly casually turned toward the sound of his name and offered a smile and a wave at the kids. He started to turn around again, but then…

Holy shit, I *felt* it when he saw me.

His gaze landed on me, and adrenaline shot through me the way it did whenever the goal horn sounded.

His lips parted, and my knees wobbled. Then he quickly pulled his gaze away and focused on something in front of him, but my attention was locked on him. He recovered first, flashed a quick smile, and then skated away to join his teammates, leaving me completely out of breath.

"Uh." My brother elbowed me. "You wanna tell me what *that* was all about?"

"Huh?" I looked at him. "What was what all about?"

Eric gave me one of those pointed, *don't insult my intelligence* glares. "Bruh. I saw what I saw."

"Oh my God, you sound just like Dallas."

"Uh-huh. So she must've seen—"

"Hush." I glanced at him, then quietly added, "It's a long story."

"Okay. And?"

I rolled my eyes. "I'll tell you later, okay?"

"Dude," he said in a harsh whisper, "I just saw Jase Kelly eye-fucking you from—"

"He was not!"

Eric huffed impatiently. "I want the story. The whole story."

I cut my eyes toward him. "Including the gory details if he and I are really—"

He punched my shoulder. "Shut up."

I just snickered, and we continued watching the Snow Bears warm up. Of course my gaze kept drifting to Kelly. He seemed to be pointedly not looking at me, but I wasn't offended by it. He needed to be thinking about hockey right now, not whatever in the world had crossed his mind when our eyes had locked through the glass.

After warm-ups ended, the team retreated into the chute, and we took our seats in the fifth row while the Zambonis came out to resurface the ice. Not two minutes after I'd sat down, my phone buzzed in my pocket.

"Aw, shit," I muttered as I dug into my pocket to get it. The only person who usually texted me in the evenings was Dallas's mom, and I hoped to God she wasn't messaging me to tell me Dallas was down with another migraine.

"Haley?" Eric asked.

"Probably."

Except it wasn't Haley. It wasn't Dallas either.

It was Jase Kelly.

Didn't realize you'd be here tonight.

I swallowed. *Come to a lot of home games*. Then it occurred to me he might have noticed I was here with another man, and Eric and I weren't exactly twins. So even though it probably didn't matter *at all*, I added, *My brother got us great seats!*

Cool! Want to hang with the team after?

My jaw went slack. Was he serious?

Another message came through: *First game back in town after we've been on the road, we usually all go out for drinks.*

Well shit. What kind of fan would I be if I turned down a chance to hang out with the Snow Bears after a game? That was my story and I was sticking to it as I wrote back, *Hell yeah!* But then of course I remembered that Eric had driven us in. And that he'd probably never forgive me if I hung out with the Snow Bears without him. *Do you mind if my brother comes with me?*

No problem. GTG—will text w/time & place during intermission.

I stared at the message, then turned to Eric. "So hey, do you want to go hang with the Snow Bears after the game?"

Eric arched an eyebrow. "Say that again?"

“The team’s going to a bar up the street after the game. Guess it’s a tradition after they’ve been on the road.” I held up the phone. “And we’re invited.”

His lips parted and he stared at me like I’d just casually suggested we’d won the lottery. “Invited? Like…”

“Like, Jase Kelly asked if I wanted to join them, and I asked if I could bring you too.”

My brother’s eyes widened. “Are you *shitting* me right now?”

I huffed an impatient breath, turned on my phone, and showed him the screen. He skimmed over the text, and his expression turned even more incredulous.

“Hold the fuck on here.” He put up his hands. “Because I’m seriously lost on how you just got an invite, from Jase Kelly, via goddamned text message, to join—” He shook himself. “How the hell are you getting texts from Jase Kelly?”

I suspected that came out louder than he’d intended it to, and people around us definitely heard. Self-consciously, I shoved my phone back in my pocket and lowered my voice. “From that thing he set up for Dallas. We were—”

“Dude, that was like three weeks ago. You guys have just been… You’ve just been texting ever since?”

“Basically, yeah.” I couldn’t help cracking a smile, because, yes, Jase Kelly and I had just been casually texting for the past few weeks, and no, really, how the hell was this my life?

Speaking a bit more discreetly now, Eric said, “So you guys are just texting.” He gestured at the glass. “And he looked at you *like that* during warm-ups.”

“He didn’t look—”

“And I’m supposed to buy that there’s nothing going on.”

“There’s nothing going on.”

“And he invited us to their after party.”

I rolled my eyes. “You know, just because I’m bi doesn’t mean I can’t be friends with a man.”

“Of course it doesn’t.” He shot me a knowing grin. “But I bet you wouldn’t say no to—”

“Dude. Shut up.”

“Am I wrong?”

I didn’t answer.

But no, he definitely wasn’t wrong.

THE AFTER PARTY, AS MY BROTHER CALLED IT, WAS IN A SPORTS bar a few blocks away from the arena. At first I was worried we wouldn’t get in since there was a sign indicating the place was closed for a private party, but my name was on the list, so they let us in.

On the way into the bar, Eric shot me a look, and I put up my hand.

“Don’t.” I shook my head. “Not a word.”

“What?” He showed his palms. “I didn’t say a thing!”

“Uh-huh. Your face said it all.”

“Oh come on, I didn’t—”

“Hey, you made it!” Jase Kelly appeared in front of me, and I damn near stumbled because holy fuck, that smile. I’d been stupid over his smile for a long time, but now it was directed at me.

As we shook hands, I cleared my throat. “Yeah. Yeah, I wouldn’t miss it. And, um…” I motioned at Eric. “This is my brother, Eric. Eric, Jase Kelly.”

Kelly turned to Eric and extended his hand. “Hey. Nice to meet you.”

I had never in my life seen Eric as starstruck as he was right then.

“Uh.” Eric blinked, then remembered how to shake hands. “Great to meet you too. I’m a, uh, big fan.”

Kelly’s smile turned a little lopsided, with a hint of both amusement and mischief. “Seems to be a family thing.”

They both glanced at me, and I laughed nervously and shrugged. “What can I say? We all have good taste in hockey.”

Kelly chuckled, then motioned for us to follow him. “Come on. I saved us some seats.”

As we started walking, my brother looked at me with wide eyes, and he mouthed, *he saved us seats?*

It was tempting to tease him about having a fanboy crush on Kelly, but I didn’t dare say a word. Eric had a good sense of humor about things like that, but I did not need anyone pointing out *my* ridiculous fanboy crush.

At a long chest-high table near the back, Kelly gestured at some empty barstools. As we sat down, he said to the other players at the same table, “Hey, you guys remember Devin, right? Dallas’s dad?”

The mention of my daughter’s name evidently made the piece click into place for everyone, and there were hellos and handshakes and introductions to my brother.

And just like that, I was at a private Snow Bears after party, drinking a beer with Jase Kelly sitting *right next* to me. I was here as *his guest*.

Holy.

Shit.

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CHAPTER 7

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JASE

What the fuck was I thinking?

I was trying like hell to keep my team from catching on that I was gay (at least until I figured out what the hell I actually was), and then my dumb ass asked Devin to join us at the bar? I might as well just stand up on the bar and come out, because if anyone caught me so much as stealing a glance at Devin, I'd be busted. No doubt about it. There was just no way my poker face was holding whenever I let my gaze drift toward the man sitting beside me.

My heart was going wild. Between the sweat on my palms and the condensation on my glass, I could barely hold on to my drink. I was always nervous in crowds, even around my teammates, but it was cranked up to an eleven tonight. Fortunately, I was pretty good at keeping that to myself. As long as no one asked me to stand up and give a speech—fuck, just thinking about that made acid rise in my throat—and no one was focused on me, I'd be fine. More or less. I wouldn't dissolve into a shaking, hyperventilating mess, anyway. Fine? Maybe not the right—

"Jase?" Devin's voice cut through the noise in the bar and in my head, and I turned to see him watching me, his face full of concern.

"Hmm? What?" I shook myself. "Sorry."

“It’s all right.” He smiled cautiously. “You just sort of…” He waved a hand in front of his face.

“Nah, I’m good.” I forced a laugh. “Thought I saw someone I knew.” *Damn, dude. Good save*.

He held my gaze like he wasn’t so sure, but then the smile relaxed and he shrugged. “Okay.” He returned his attention to the conversation with Andersson, and he casually sipped his beer.

I was grateful for the bar’s noise to mask my relieved sigh. Why was I stressing about this? About him being here? All right, to be fair, I stressed over everything, and that instantly ratcheted up when it involved someone I was interested in and someone potentially figuring out I was gay and—*breathe, Jase*.

Had it been a mistake, asking him to join us tonight? I’d wanted to see Devin again ever since he and Dallas had left the arena, and texting him constantly hadn’t helped at all. When I’d realized he was at the game, I just couldn’t resist. I hadn’t thought about anything except that Devin was there and the fact that I wanted to see him without the glass between us and all those cameras and spectators around us.

So what did I do? Have him meet me in a place where there was no one but Snow Bears and their guests. Where there were too many people and there was too much noise to really have a conversation, and just enough people and noise to drown out my pounding heart. At least this way I wouldn’t say something stupid. Or, well, if I did, he probably wouldn’t hear me.

I held onto my drink and tried to blame the dampness on my glass being sweaty, not my hand. I’d been my usual nervous wreck before the game, and I’d done my usual comedown routine afterward, but it hadn’t helped much because I’d known I was coming here. That *he’d* be here. And now I was here, and he was here, and… Fuck, what was I supposed to do now?

My mind had already started going down the usual doubt spiral that kicked on whenever I was attracted to a man. Was I really into him? Or was I just trying to prove to myself that I was gay and that I hadn't just jumped on that label because it conveniently explained a bunch of things I didn't like thinking about?

Deep down, I knew I really was attracted to him, just like I knew—just like I was *pretty sure* I really was gay. Or, well, I was usually pretty sure. The problem was those nagging little voices that didn't like thinking my ex-girlfriends had been wrong. Or that thought if those exes were wrong about this, then they were *right* about how lousy I was in bed. And maybe that was why I was clinging to "am I gay?" because that was a whole lot easier than wondering if sex had never been great between us because I was bad at it, not because I was gay and they were women.

Except…if I were really gay or bi or whatever, would I still be questioning it like this at twenty-nine? Seriously? I would *know* by now, for God's sake. That wasn't something that just dropped out of the sky after all these years and girlfriends. Was it?

I stole another look at Devin, who was sipping a beer and listening to Andersson tell some outrageous story about a fight he'd won at a game in Montreal. Usually I'd be calling out my teammate on his bullshit and reminding him that the other guy had knocked him on his ass, but I barely heard Andersson right now. I was way too zeroed in on the gorgeous man who'd somehow dropped into my world and was now sitting beside me in this bar.

If I'm not gay, why does everything spin when I look at you?

Hell, *was* it possible to get this far in life without knowing I was into men? Because no woman had ever done to my concentration what Devin was doing to it now.

Across the table, Eric looked at his phone and frowned. Then he faced Devin, and they exchanged something unspoken. Devin nodded, and they both got up, which made my heart sink. No. No, he couldn't be leaving yet. Could he? Fuck.

Eric extended his hand across the table. "Listen, we have to take off, but it was great to meet you and hang with the team."

"Thanks for hanging out with us." I shook his hand. "It was nice meeting you too."

He smiled, then turned to Devin. "You coming?"

Disappointment hit me in the chest. Damn. He must have driven, so if he had to go, Devin had to go. Tonight was over already.

Devin glanced at me, jaw working. After a second, he looked at his brother. "You know, I could probably get an Uber or something."

"You sure?" Eric's eyes flicked toward me, and when he met Devin's gaze again, a hint of a grin appeared on his lips. "Whatever, man." He came around the table and clapped his brother's arm. "I'll see you later."

He said his goodbyes to everyone else, then shouldered his way through the crowd.

Devin turned to me, his expression suddenly uncertain. "You, um, don't mind if I stick around, do you?"

"Mind?" I laughed, shaking my head. "Not at all! Definitely stick around." *I can't breathe around you, but I don't want you to leave. What does that even mean?*

Devin smiled, which didn't help with that whole breathing thing, and he took his seat again. "I probably shouldn't stay too late since I have to work in the morning, but I'm not quite ready to take off."

My heart was doing things it didn't even do during high-intensity hockey games. "Well, we'll be here a while. So, you're welcome to stay as long as you want. And I, um…" I

cleared my throat. “You don’t have to get an Uber. I could give you a lift home.”

Devin met my gaze. “Really?”

“Sure.” I shrugged. “I only had one beer tonight, and my car’s just back at the stadium, if you don’t mind walking a ways.”

“No, no, not at all. But I live out in Pine Lake.” His brow creased. “I don’t want you going out of your way to—”

“Nah, it’s not that far out of the way.” *And it means more time with you. Oh, God, why am I so ridiculous over you?* “Just let me know when you want to go.” I motioned toward my teammates. “I see these assholes every day, so—”

“Hey!” Jameson turned around and wagged a finger at me. “I heard that, smartass.”

I shrugged unrepentantly. “I wasn’t trying to be sly.”

He flipped me off, and Devin’s laugh was… *How* was I still even questioning if I was into dudes? The way my body and brain reacted to every little thing he did—there was no way in hell that was just from my ex getting under my skin.

I am surer than I’ve been in a long time that I’m gay.

Because I’ve never wanted anyone *like I want you*.

WE HUNG AROUND AND SHOT THE SHIT WITH MY TEAMMATES FOR another hour or so. Devin finally said he needed to bow out so he could get some sleep before he had to work tomorrow, so we said our goodbyes and slid our hands into our jacket pockets as we headed out into the chilly evening.

And suddenly we didn’t have the noise as a buffer. It was just us. Just me. Just Devin. Just an empty street and my pounding heart.

Come on, come on. Make some conversation. Say something!

I racked my brain, and finally went with: “So, um, out of curiosity…” I glanced at him. “How many times did you bring that hat to a game before…” I gestured like I was throwing something, then put my hand back in my pocket.

Devin laughed, cheeks coloring slightly under the streetlights, and he dropped his gaze to the pavement at our feet. “I couldn’t tell you, to be honest. Eric and I come to a lot of games, and I just kept it with me. Then you got a hat trick during an away game, and my brother started saying it must be bad luck, bringing the hat to games. I wondered myself a few times.”

I chuckled. “Is *that* why it took me so long to get another one?”

He glanced at me, some actual horror on this face, but then he laughed too with the cutest hint of shyness. “Maybe? But you broke the curse.”

“No thanks to you,” I muttered playfully.

He shrugged. “Sorry?”

We both laughed as we kept walking. The stadium was still two blocks away, and how the hell was I supposed to make enough small talk to get us that far? And then all the way to Pine Lake? Fuuuck.

But then Devin said, “So, um, this hasn’t been… I mean, showing up at a game and talking back and forth as much as we have…” He swallowed. “That hasn’t been weird, has it? I swear, I’m not trying to stalk you or anything.”

“Weird? Oh God, no. It’s, um…” I flashed him a nervous smile. “It’s been nice. The emails, and…” Facing straight forward again, I shrugged. “It’s been nice.”

“Has it?” Was that a note of hopefulness in his voice? Or just wishful thinking on my part?

“It has. I mean, as much as I’m running around and as much time as I spend on planes and buses, there’s a lot of hurry up and wait, you know? A lot of downtime. So it’s always nice to have someone to chat with.”

“Oh. Okay. Okay, good.” He rolled his shoulders as if there’d been some stiffness building that I hadn’t noticed. “I just, um, I didn’t want you to feel like you *had* to keep chatting or that…” He laughed softly, shaking his head. “I don’t even know what I thought. But it’s good to know it’s not one-sided.”

“It’s not. Don’t worry.”

We glanced at each other, and I almost tripped over an invisible crack in the sidewalk. Why was it so reassuring and endearing to see my own nerves looking back at me? I’d worried myself into the ground over those text and email threads, and I’d debated over whether to invite him tonight because I didn’t know if that would be weird. But he’d been wondering the same thing. So maybe we were closer to the same page than I thought.

That had to be wishful thinking, though. Continuing friendly emails and texts was one thing. Being on the same page as me? I’d…be smart to wait for a few more signs before I made any assumptions there.

We crossed the last street and continued toward the stadium’s parking garage. At the elevator, I took a keycard out of my wallet and swiped it so we could go down to the private level. Not surprisingly, when we stepped out of the elevator, the garage was mostly empty this time of night—just the cars of a few stragglers who’d probably had too much to drink tonight and would come pick up their rides tomorrow.

My car was backed into a space in the third to last row. I pressed the key fob, and the lights flashed.

Devin whistled. “Wow, that is a nice car. Is that…” He tilted his head, peering at the hood ornament. “Holy shit, is that an Aston Martin?”

“Yeah. It’s a DBS Superleggera.”

“Not that I’d know the difference,” he said with a quiet laugh. “It’s gorgeous, though.”

“Thanks.” I chuckled self-consciously. “It’s not the most *practical* thing I’ve ever bought, but…”

“I don’t know.” He raked his eyes over the sleek red car. “I think if I could afford one, I’d probably buy it just because I could.”

“Yeah, that was kind of what I did.” We got into the car, and as I put on my seat belt, I added, “I still can’t bring myself to buy one of those huge houses like some of my buddies have, but when I saw this?” I gave the steering wheel a gentle pat. “I couldn’t resist.”

“Can’t imagine why.”

I started the engine. “You should see Jameson’s. He’s the reason I bought an Aston Martin in the first place because I went to the dealership with him.” I shook my head as I pulled out of the parking space. “He got a Valkyrie. That’s a three-million-dollar car.”

Devin made a choked sound. “Three million dollars for a *car?*”

“Uh-huh. I mean, it’s a gorgeous ride, but…” I grimaced. “Next to that thing, this one is legit *practical*.”

He laughed, and good God, there went my heart again.

Somehow, I managed to drive without clipping a curb or grinding a gear, and I took us out of the garage and into the night. There wasn’t much traffic this late, so we cruised through green light after green light on our way through downtown. Secretly, I wished a few of them would turn red just so I’d have an excuse to steal a couple more minutes in this car with Devin. I had no idea if or when I’d see him after this. Or how in the world to tell him I *wanted* to see him after this. Maybe a minute or two at an intersection would give me enough time to figure that out.

As I sailed past another green light, Devin laughed, shaking his head.

I glanced at him. “What?”

“Nothing. I…” Devin exhaled and leaned back against the headrest. “It probably sounds stupid, but this is kind of

surreal.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, being in this car. With you. I’m…” He hesitated, then quietly added, “My daughter’s not the only fan in my house, let’s put it that way. Even after we’ve been chatting, it’s, um… It’s wild to be hanging out with you.”

I shrugged. “I’m just a guy who plays hockey.”

“Uh-huh. I don’t know if anyone’s told you, but you play hockey pretty well.” We exchanged glances over the console, and both laughed. Still smiling, he added, “Turns out you’re pretty fun to hang out with, too.”

Holy shit. I had no idea how I didn’t veer off the road into a fire hydrant or something. Miraculously staying between the lines, I casually said, “Yeah?”

“Yeah. Tonight was a lot of fun. And those emails and texts…” The seat creaked quietly as he shifted a little. “They make the boring workday go by, let’s put it that way.”

I laughed despite my ever-present nerves. “Anything to get through the boredom, right?”

We continued out of the city, and he directed me to his street in Pine Lake. All the while, I wished I could figure out how to tell him this was surreal for me too. A few weeks ago, he’d been a name on a note tucked into a hat tossed on to the ice. It was mind-blowing to think about how much things had changed since then, and I had no idea how to explain how much I loved it, but also how fucking terrifying it was. What *was* going on? What were we doing? What did Devin think we were doing? What did he *want* us to be doing? I could barely read people I’d known for years. Now here was this incredibly hot stranger who’d dropped out of the sky and into my world and had me thinking and feeling things I couldn’t explain, and I didn’t have a clue what to do with any of that.

How do I tell you I don’t want this to be a one-time thing?

Sooner than I would have liked, I pulled into the parking garage under Devin's apartment building. I parked, but didn't shut off the engine.

Devin took off his seat belt. "So, um. Thanks for the ride. And for inviting me to hang with the team tonight. I mean it—I had a great time."

"So did I. It was great having you along."

As the engine idled, our eyes met in the pale light of the overhead fluorescents and my headlights reflecting off the concrete wall. Neither of us spoke. Devin didn't reach for the door, but his eyes flicked toward my lips and back, sending a surge of adrenaline right through me. We were just sitting here in my car, and my heart was doing things it usually only did when I was out on the ice, and holy fuck, his eyes were gorgeous.

"So, um." I moistened my lips, and wondered what it meant when he jumped. "The team's going back out on the road, but…" I swallowed hard. "When we're back in town… If you want to…"

"Do this again?" he whispered.

Pulse pounding, I nodded. "Yeah." Then, feeling just a *little* braver, I added, "Maybe not with the whole team."

Devin's eyebrows jumped, and I had a split second to freak out that I'd overstepped before he smiled. "Really? I mean… Um. I mean, you'd want to? With just…" He gestured at both of us.

I nodded again.

"Okay. Yeah." Oh my God, that smile. "We can figure out logistics later, but yes. Yeah. Definitely."

"Great." I didn't even try to hide the relief. "Logistics… Yeah, those can wait. We'll just, uh, keep texting, I guess?"

His smile brightened even more. "Definitely."

"Awesome. I'll check the game schedule, but I think we're back in like two weeks."

Devin nodded. "All right. I should, uh…" He gestured at the stairwell a few feet from the car. "Seven comes early, so

I should…” Our eyes met, and he trailed off. He still didn’t reach for the door.

“I should go too. Still need to pack.” But did I really want this to be over a second sooner than it had to be? “I can do that in the morning, though.”

“Still. I shouldn’t keep you.” He still held my gaze. Still didn’t reach for the door. “And thanks for the ride home, by the way. Best Uber ever.”

I laughed. “This one’s on the house and everything.”

“Yeah? I don’t even have to tip?”

“Not unless you want to.”

His eyebrow flicked up. Our eyes were still locked, but there was a hint of a challenge in his eyes now. Something playful. Something *hot*.

Did he…?

Were we…?

What if I…?

Cautiously, hoping I wasn’t reading him all wrong, I leaned *slightly* closer to him. I gained maybe a quarter inch of ground, and that was as far as I could go without some kind of sign from him.

He pressed his elbow onto the console and leaned closer as well. His eyes flicked from mine to my lips and back, and when our gazes met again—God, I must’ve moved in further without even realizing it because he was *right there*.

Holy shit, we were almost touching now, and there was no misinterpreting what kind of touch was coming. Not when we were hovering this close, one head tilt away from brushing noses or one drop of courage away from meeting his lips with mine. The man I’d been staring at all night was almost close enough to taste. Almost… Just a little…

Devin’s soft, shuddering breath rushed past my lips, and the reality of what was happening slammed into me and scattered whatever courage I’d had.

I jerked back and exhaled. “I… God, I’m sorry. I, um…”

“What’s wrong?”

Shaking my head, I closed my eyes. “I don’t even know. Nerves. I’ve, um…” I swallowed hard, and despite the sudden queasiness in the pit of my stomach, looked at him again. “I’ve never done this.” Embarrassment joined the fear, and I pressed my elbow into the window as I rubbed my forehead. “I’m sorry. I mean, I’ve done this, but… Not, um…”

“Not with a man?”

Was I that obvious? Fuck.

“Not with a man,” I admitted, gut roiling with all kinds of unwelcome feelings.

“Jase,” Devin whispered. “Look at me.”

I swallowed hard, then did as he asked. He was still leaning on the console, and his eyes were gentle, and nothing in his expression said I was an idiot for being spooked by an almost-kiss, or that I was ridiculous for making it this far in life without ever touching a man. Except I felt like an idiot, and I felt ridiculous. If touching a man scared me like this, what the fuck was wrong with me? *Was* I actually gay? Because God knew I’d questioned that a million times, and now that I was freaking out at the prospect of acting on it with a real live man, did it mean it was wrong? Had I just convinced myself I was gay or bought into my ex’s accusations or—

“Hey.” He reached across the space between us and put a hand over mine, the soft touch sending a jolt of electricity through me. “Jase.”

I realized then that I’d broken eye contact again, and I made myself meet his gaze.

“We don’t have to do this,” he said softly.

Panic shot through me, as if this was a now or never thing. It had taken me how long to even have this opportunity with a man? When would the next one happen? And when would I have another shot with *this* man in particular?

“It’s not that I don’t want to.” I gulped. “I do. I’ve just never… I haven’t…”

“That doesn’t mean you have to now. Or with me.”

I searched his eyes. “And if I want to? Now? With you?”

It was Devin’s turn for what seemed like a nervous swallow. “I’m not saying no. I just don’t want to overwhelm you.”

Oh, it was way too late for that.

And I’d made it to this point; panicked heartbeat or not, I wasn’t ready to retreat. God knew when I’d make it this far again.

So, I relaxed as much as I could and leaned in close again. Devin’s hand moved to the side of my face, then up into my hair, and his touch was firm—not restraining, not like he wouldn’t let me pull away if I wanted to, but steadying. Reassuring. His breath warmed my lips as he whispered, “You sure about this?”

“No.” But I kissed him anyway.

And just like that, my entire world made sense.

I’d never minded kissing, but there’d never been fireworks. Maybe it was men, maybe it was *this* man, but this long, languid kiss had the whole world spinning around me. After all that second-guessing and worrying and wondering if I even knew who I was or what I wanted, all it took was one kiss to make me land on my feet and know that, yes, I definitely wanted this. I definitely wanted men—this one, at least—in ways I’d never wanted women. I’d always thought there was something wrong with me. Something missing. I’d wondered if those rumors were just the closest thing I could find to an explanation.

But no, I *was* gay. Or bi. Or…something. But very, very into the man whose fingers were in my hair and whose tongue was sliding past my lips and turning my whole spine to liquid. Holy fuck, if he kept kissing me like this, I’d come in my jeans.

I touched my forehead to his, and damn, I couldn't remember a kiss ever leaving me this breathless. I also couldn't remember bringing my hand up to touch his face. Or a time when I *didn't* know what his stubbled jaw felt like under the pad of my thumb. Trailing my thumb back and forth over coarse five o'clock shadow and warm skin, I shivered as goose bumps seemed to spring up on top of goose bumps all over my back and arms.

"Holy shit," Devin whispered shakily.

"Uh-huh."

We were both still for a moment, just breathing, and then his fingers tightened in my hair and he kissed me again, harder this time. These seats were uncomfortable as hell for this, but I didn't care. I'd stand barefoot on Legos and not give a damn as long as Devin was kissing me like this—exploring my mouth, gripping my hair, moaning every now and then.

He broke the kiss this time, panting hard as he looked in my eyes. "This is really your first time with a man?"

"Mmhmm." I swallowed. "It's a long story, but…yeah."

He swept his tongue across his swollen lips. "You wouldn't know it."

"Huh?"

Devin grinned, running his fingers through my hair. "The way you kiss?" He shook his head. "Never would've guessed it's your first time."

"Well, I mean…" I cleared my throat. "My first time with a *guy*."

He shrugged. "Still. I have zero complaints."

"Good. Neither do I." His expression turned serious as he searched my eyes. "But we don't have to take this any further tonight." His fingertips drifted down the side of my face. "If things go too fast, it might…"

I wanted to tell him that taking it slow was the farthest thing from my mind. That we should find a flat surface, get

out of these clothes, and make up for all the years I'd lost to being confused about who I was.

But Devin was right. As much as I hated admitting that at twenty-nine goddamned years old, I was nervous as a teenage virgin over this, I *was* that nervous. I'd been alternately avoiding this closet door, pretending it didn't exist, and trying to find the courage to open it and walk through it. Tonight, I'd gone crashing through it, splintering it right off the hinges, and…

And I hadn't even really processed that yet.

"Jase." He drew the pad of his thumb across my cheekbone. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm…" Fuck, I'd almost started hyperventilating and hadn't even realized it. Okay, Devin was definitely right—this was as far as I could go tonight without breaking my brain. "Just… It's all really, really new." A kiss? God, I sounded so stupid, tripping up this much over kissing someone.

But Devin just smiled and trailed his fingertips down my cheek. "It's all right. I'd rather take this extra slow and maybe frustrate ourselves a little than go too fast and regret something."

That settled some of my nerves back down, and I nodded. "Good idea. And I should… I guess I shouldn't keep you out here all night."

He glanced at the clock on the dash, and his shoulders drooped a bit. "Damn. Yeah. I should go." He met my gaze again. "Let me know when you're back in town."

"Right. I will. And I'll, um… See you again soon?"

Devin cupped my cheek and pressed a soft kiss to my lips, sending a flutter of both nerves and excitement right through me. "I'm looking forward to it."

Oh my God, so am I.

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CHAPTER 8

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DEVIN

I SHUT THE FRONT DOOR OF MY APARTMENT AND LEANED AGAINST it, mind reeling.

That really… That really happened, right?

I'd just spent the last however many minutes making out in an Aston Martin with Jase Kelly?

Oh yeah. Yeah, I had. I swore I could still feel the cool softness of his hair between my fingers and the heat of his mouth moving with mine. I was still hard, for God's sake. Probably because my brain couldn't let go of that very, very hot exchange that had started fogging up the windows of the car. The car that I would never even be able to afford to test drive, and that was owned by…

Oh my God.

Weeks of texting and emailing still hadn't done anything to keep me from getting starstruck over him at the bar tonight. Making out with him in the parking lot? My *dreams* didn't get this wild.

Tony strolled in from the living room, sat down in the doorway, and judged me. He stared up at me, yellow eyes narrow and full of *where the hell were you?* and *why is the bottom of my food dish visible?* I laughed quietly—I could spend a few minutes making out with a celebrity in an expensive car, and all it took was a blistering glare from my cat to remind of my place in the world.

Shaking my head, I pushed myself off the door and headed for the kitchen to make sure the little shit had food. And while I was in there, I needed… I don't know. A beer, maybe. Coffee? Some cold water splashed in my face?

But going into the kitchen meant crossing the living room, and as soon I stepped into the living room, my gaze went straight to the most prominent piece of our Snow Bears collection—the signed poster of Jase. I stopped in my tracks.

Whoa. That was weird. Staring at that image of him frozen in time on the ice, it was like I could see three different people in one set of intense dark eyes:

The fearless, unstoppable hockey god.

The sweet, caring man who'd pulled out all the stops for my kid.

And the confused, closeted guy who'd slammed headlong into his own sexuality when we'd kissed over the center console of his car.

I'd been chatting with him for the last couple of weeks. Making friends with him. Maybe even flirting a little. And tonight…

I pushed out a breath. That particular poster was one of my favorite shots of him because it was so dynamic, catching him in the middle of a sharp turn with ice crystals spraying up from his skates while his attention was laser-focused on something off-camera. It was impressive and hot, and now I actually *knew* the guy in the frame, and my mind was officially blown. How many times had I imagined him while I'd jerked off in bed or in the shower? Hell, I could remember a few lackluster one-night stands where I'd been struggling to get off, but then let myself imagine Jase Kelly, and… Well, I hadn't been struggling anymore after that.

Tony slammed his hip against my calf and meowed, as if to tell me I was heading in the right direction, but needed to actually keep moving. I reached down to tousle his ears,

which earned me a swat of disdain. Chuckling, I continued toward the kitchen, but my mind stayed firmly with that poster, and with the man whose car I'd just stepped out of.

I had never in a million years imagined I'd actually have a shot with him. Even tonight, when we'd been playing that quiet game of chicken over the center console, part of me had still disbelieved we were going anywhere. It was all in my head. It had to be.

Right up until it wasn't.

Staring at that poster, my mouth watered. Was this what groupies felt like after they hooked up with their favorite rock star? Shit, we hadn't even really hooked up.

I closed my eyes and sighed. Goddamn. I should have brought him in. We should have been in bed *right now*. When the hell was I going to get an opportunity like that again?

Except… No. He'd been so nervous, and he'd never even kissed a man before. If we'd come in here and taken things too far, then he'd regret it and so would I. No fantasy—not even taking Jase goddamned Kelly to bed—was worth the possibility that we'd be moving too fast for him.

But I really, really hoped he wanted to connect again.

And in the meantime, I needed to at least try to get some sleep, because my boss would not appreciate it if I came in looking like a bleary-eyed zombie tomorrow. I wasn't sure how exactly I was supposed to sleep after this evening, but I'd find a way.

So, after I'd topped off Tony's food—he'd had plenty to begin with—I headed into the bedroom to call it a night. I had just finished brushing my teeth and setting my alarm when a text came through from Jase.

Is it weird that my mind is basically blown?

I laughed into the silence of my apartment. *His* mind was blown? Oh. Dude.

Nah, it's not weird, I wrote back. *Was it too much though?*

He started typing. Stopped. Started again. Stopped for a long time. Started again.

My heart pounded as I waited. He'd seemed into it in the moment, even after his nerves had tripped him up briefly. I'd followed his lead, right? I hadn't pushed him?

Finally, he said, *No, it wasn't too much. Just new.*

Well, that was a relief.

A second later, another message came through:

Checked schedule. I'm on the road for the next week and a half. Still want to see you again when I get back.

My inner fanboy nearly escaped in a sound that would've startled Tony and earned me a concerned knock from a neighbor. Though having a drink with Jase had made him seem much more human, he *was* still Jase Kelly, and I *did* still have a mighty crush. One that was even stronger now that I knew how soft his lips were and *oh God he really kissed me*. It was so weird, being this dizzy over a kiss, but that kiss had stopped my world on a dime and reduced everything to *him* and *us*.

The weirdest thing was I couldn't tell where the fanboy crush stopped and the *oh my God I really want this guy* started. It had been so long since I'd had much of a connection with anyone, the feeling was almost alien now, and I couldn't decide what this was. Had Jase and I really made some kind of connection? Not love at first sight or anything, but was there some actual chemistry here?

That kiss in the car said so. Especially since I'd completely forgotten who he was while his lips had been against mine. He'd just been Jase. Not a hockey player. Not a sports idol. Not someone I'd drooled over from the stands or on TV. Just an incredibly sexy and sweet man who'd been shaking with nerves and had a kiss to die for.

And he was waiting for me to respond.

It took several tries to type out the message because my brain had gone blank, but I managed to write: *Yes, definitely. LMK when. Looking forward to it*.

Talk about an understatement.

I put my phone on the nightstand and settled into bed. As I lay there, my mind stayed firmly on everything we'd done in Jase's car, and I wasn't at all surprised when I started getting hard again. Why fight it? It wasn't like I'd sleep tonight before I'd relieved this tension.

Eyes closed, I slid a hand beneath the covers. Looking forward to seeing Jase again? Oh yeah, because just the little taste I'd had tonight had me so turned on I was shaking.

I had no idea what was going to happen when we saw each other again. I had no idea where this was going to go, or if it was just sex, or… Or I didn't know.

All I knew was that tonight I'd kissed Jase Kelly.

And I couldn't wait to see him again.

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CHAPTER 9

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JASE

I couldn't get Devin out of my head.

Long after I'd packed for the road trip, showered, and gone to bed, I was still wide awake and thinking about the man whose lips had left mine tingling all the way home.

I wished I could say I felt good right then. And I felt great about this evening and how everything had gone with Devin, but right on cue, as soon as I was alone and had nothing else to focus on, my mind revved up like a racecar engine. Instead of drifting off with a head full of long looks and longer kisses, my brain had to burn rubber over every way this could go wrong. Every worst-case scenario.

One kiss had broken me out of the "am I gay or not?" loop I'd been stuck in for ages, and that had left me off-balance. And even if I could have gotten my head around it in a single night, the fact was I didn't know how to be relaxed. I needed something to sweat about and lose sleep over, or I didn't know what to do with myself. I assumed, anyway, since I couldn't remember a time when I didn't have something to sweat about and lose sleep over.

I'd jerked off in the shower—twice—but still couldn't fall asleep. A hockey game and two orgasms couldn't knock me out when my brain was whirring this fast.

Because… What now?

What if I still sucked in bed when I was with a guy? What if I wasn't enough for Devin like I hadn't been for my ex-girlfriends? What if I was okay to fuck, but not to date? Or vice versa? Or *both*?

And Devin had a daughter. What if I was good enough to fuck *and* good enough to date, but I wasn't someone he wanted around his kid? He probably expected any serious boyfriend to be a stepdad for her, so what happened when he realized I wasn't stepdad material?

God, just thinking about being a stepdad made my heart race. I was probably passable as a fuck buddy or a boyfriend, but a parent? Was I cut out for that? I was probably getting way ahead of myself, but the fact was, Devin had a daughter. She was obviously the center of his world, which she should be.

Maddox had four kids—one with his ex-girlfriend, three from his wife's first marriage. These days, as far as he was concerned, they were all his kids, but I remembered when he and Crystal had first started dating. He'd been nervous as hell about being a stepdad, and he'd already been a dad to start with!

So what if Devin and I started dating for real? What if, by some stroke of luck, we ended up doing more than messing around in the front seat of my car? Not just sleeping together, but *being* together? I could barely get my head around being a boyfriend, especially since I'd done such a shit job in that department in the past. I wasn't cut out to—

"Fuck," I muttered into my silent bedroom. I scrubbed both hands over my face. What the hell was wrong with me? Literally all Devin and I had done was make out a little in my car and make plans to see each other again. What was the point of worrying about whether I'd be able to pull off being a stepdad when I didn't even know if we'd make it past the first night together?

Except this was how my mind worked. One of the reasons I'd never upgraded from my condo was how much I'd freaked out after buying it. What if I was traded? What if the real estate market tanked and I couldn't unload the place? What if I'd made some mistake and hadn't actually paid the whole thing off and the bank caught the error and foreclosed on me? I was pretty sure that was literally impossible, but it didn't stop me from wondering if it could happen.

And that was to say nothing about how I'd lost my shit for a *month* after I'd bought the car. Or how I stressed so much over logistics when I went on vacation that it basically defeated the purpose a vacation. It was a damn good thing someone else handled all the travel details when the team was on the road; all I had to do was be where they told me to at the designated time, and even that was enough to make me jittery. God help me if I got stuck in traffic on the way to the airport.

Even when things went smoothly, half my energy on the road was spent keeping myself on an even keel so I didn't have a breakdown. And sometimes I did anyway, which could seriously fuck me if I had a game that night. I'd only had to scratch because of it a handful of times in eight years as a pro, and there'd been a few times before that in college. But the nights when I didn't scratch, hockey took ten times more effort than it did on a good day. I'd put that effort in—my team depended on me, after all—but it was hard as fuck. And ironically, sometimes the effort it took to keep one of those breakdowns away exhausted me enough that I may as well have just let it happen.

One of my coaches in college had said I was like an oyster. Get a grain of sand in me—an exam coming up that I worried about passing, a fight with a girlfriend, the unshakable fear that I'd oversleep and miss the bus to a game—and I'd obsess over it and put layer after layer of

worry on it. Problem was, instead of getting a pearl out of the deal, I just got fucking tired.

It exhausted me. I was pretty sure it exhausted everyone around me.

So how much worse was it going to be now that I had something *else* to obsess over?

And, oh Christ. What if Devin saw me losing my mind over something? Some of my teammates had seen it, and Maddox and Kuznetsov were amazing at talking me down. No one gave me shit about it or acted like it was an inconvenience or whatever.

But they also knew I could play hockey. I might choke during interviews or be sweating bullets before warm-ups even started, but there was plenty of proof that once my skates met the ice, I could and did play hockey the way I was expected to. For the last three seasons running, I'd been one of the top five scorers in the league. My teammates could live with me being a train wreck in the locker room and occasionally on the plane as long as I had the stats to make it worth their while.

There was not, however, any proof that I could be a boyfriend or even a fuck buddy who was worth the effort it took to deal with my mental spirals.

Was it ironic that I was obsessing over whether my habit of obsessing over everything would ruin whatever this was I had with Devin? Probably. But what was I going to do? Just…*stop* obsessing over things? Magically have a normal mind that reacted normally to things that normal people could just roll with? Pretty sure that wasn't how that worked.

Sighing, I rubbed my tired eyes.

A normal mind wasn't in the cards for me. I'd just have to hope what I had wasn't enough to scare Devin away. In fact, maybe it worked to my advantage that I was on the road more often than not for most of the year. The less he saw me, the less opportunity he'd have to see the *real* me.

And the less he sees me, the less likely I'll be able to hold his interest.

Aw, fuck.

Something else to worry about all goddamned night…

I YAWNED ALL THE WAY TO THE AIRPORT THE NEXT MORNING. I couldn't even remember where we were going—we had a game tonight, right?—but at least I knew where to check in.

As I made my way through the airport, waited by the gate, and sat on the team's charter jet waiting to take off, the texting with Devin was nonstop. Any time I didn't need to focus on something else or switch to airplane mode, my nose was buried in my phone and we were messaging back and forth.

As the plane taxied, I had to switch to airplane mode, so we ended the conversation for the time being. All the way to…to…well, whatever the hell city it was, my brain was on him and him alone. I'd pull my focus back to hockey when I needed to, but right now, I was enjoying this distraction.

Once I'd landed, we started up again until he had to take off and pick up Dallas from school. Then again until I had to suit up for warm-ups.

And fuck me, but every time one of our conversations hit a lull or came to an end while one of us was unreachable, my mind started in on its usual bullshit. Questions pelted my brain without letting up: What were we doing? What did he expect from me? What did I have any right to expect from him? What happened once we were in the same place and the same bed, and the pressure was on to go through the motions with a guy who'd been with other guys before and knew what good sex and bad sex really were? And how would he respond when he saw my dick? My ex hadn't been

impressed with what I was packing, and I didn't come close to stacking up to the guys I'd watched in porn, and—

"Kelly?" Maddox's voice startled me, and my phone tumbled out of my hand and clattered on the locker room floor.

"Hey. Uh." I reached down to grab it. "Sorry. I didn't even hear you come in." I fumbled with the phone but managed to get a grip on it, and I sat up, rolling my shoulders and wondering when they'd started getting so stiff. How the fuck long had I been sitting here getting spun up by my own brain? And what was I supposed to be doing? Good God, what the hell was wrong with—

"Jase." Maddox put a firm hand on my shoulder. "Look at me, dude."

I swallowed, then met my teammate's eyes.

His brow was pinched with concern. "You with me?"

I nodded and reached up to rub my neck. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm…" I laughed halfheartedly and shook my head. "Just working myself up over things."

The concern stayed in place. "Anything you, uh…" He arched an eyebrow in an unspoken *I want to help but still seem manly* way, which was him asking if I needed to talk about anything.

I shook my head. "I'm good. Just worrying more than I needed to." Then I leaned forward and kneaded the back of my neck with both hands. I had a hockey game tonight. If I let myself spiral into a breakdown, I'd be exhausted before I even put on my gear.

So how long is this going to go on, and is there any chance it'll get better before I find some way to screw up with Devin?

"Hey, man." Maddox sat down beside me and put a firm hand on my shoulder. "You gonna be good to play tonight? We've still got time if there's something you need to get out."

Sitting up slowly, I took a deep breath. “I’ll be fine. Just, um, just started dating somebody. Kind of. And I’m…” I gestured at my head, then made a *what can you do?* gesture.

“Ooh. Gotcha.” He grinned, but there was still concern in his eyes. “Is, um, everything good there?”

“So far, yeah. But it’s new. And you know me with new shit.”

He laughed softly. “Yeah. I do.”

Something about his calm acceptance actually calmed me down. He knew how I was, and sometimes all I needed was exactly what he was doing—just sitting here and *not* freaking out over whatever it was that had me going out of my head. He never tried to tell me it was no big deal and that I was overreacting—that was the quickest way to send me into a hardcore spiral. Instead, he just calmly hung out, and if I needed him to, he’d talk me through it.

Thank God I had a few teammates who could tell even before I could that I was on that downward spiral. I’d bought Maddox and Kuznetsov each a *lot* of beers after they’d eased me out of my own head, and I’d buy them plenty more.

This time, Maddox had shown up while I was only kind of twitchy, but I hadn’t started going downhill. Just having him here was enough to level me out, and after a minute or two, I felt stupid for how wound up I’d been before he’d walked in. This wasn’t a crisis—it was a new relationship. Or something.

Get a grip, dude.

I rolled some stiffness out of my shoulders. “We should, um, suit up before Coach comes looking for us.”

“You’re good?”

“Yeah.” I managed to smile. “I’m good. Let’s go kick some ass.”

He finally smiled, gave my shoulder a firm squeeze and got up. “Sounds like a plan. How about we beat these

assholes this time?”

I laughed as I stood. “Well maybe if you remember how to handle the puck, we can—”

“Fuck you.” He punched my arm playfully. “Go put your skates on, dickhead.”

FaceTime tonight?

My toes curled inside my shoes. Fuck yeah, FaceTime tonight. We’d done it a couple of times so far, and though it had been a few days since we’d seen each other in person, it was always great to talk to him face to face…even if it did mean I was awake all night simultaneously fantasizing about getting him into bed and coming up with every imaginable way that would be a disaster.

What could I say? My brain was a weird place. Every time I saw Devin’s face or read one of his texts, I was both excited because this was really happening and freaking the hell out because it was really happening. I had no idea if the next thing I did or said might bring it all to a screeching halt, or if I *wanted* to bring it to a screeching halt just so I could fucking relax.

And with seven o’clock coming up fast, my nerves were going wild. Settled into my hotel room, I watched TV to kill time, cutting my eyes toward the clock every minute or so as it steadily inched toward seven. Every passing minute, I was more excited and more nervous. By the time it was six-thirty, I was a wreck, but at least I knew I was pretty good at hiding that, especially if we were talking on FaceTime instead of in person. God knew I’d had years of practice pretending I was chill when I was absolutely not.

I closed my eyes and took some slow, deep breaths. I knew I was overreacting and overthinking this. That was the fucked-up thing about when my head did this to me—I

knew it was just my idiot brain looking for something to freak out over, but it was damn convincing and incredibly hard to ignore.

Especially when I was heading into something completely unknown. Dating a man. Dating a single parent. Dating *Devin*. I tried to reassure myself this wasn't my first dating rodeo, but that only made things worse because my mind had plenty of ammunition to freak me out over how badly those past rodeos had been. So I switched gears and tried to think of this as something totally new. I could still blow it, and I probably *would* blow it, but I wasn't a proven failure at this yet, so… So that made me a little less anxious, and I ran with it instead of questioning it.

I ran with it, and I waited for seven to roll around so I could see his face and talk to him.

Seven o'clock came and went.

Then seven-thirty.

Then eight.

What didn't come was the FaceTime request from Devin. No text, either. Was he waiting for me to make the connection? Oh shit, was he sitting there wondering why *I* hadn't called?

I stared at my phone for a full minute, trying to figure out what to say. Then I wrote out a text, rewrote it a few times, and finally sent: *We still on for tonight?*

That wasn't too much, was it? Passive aggressive? Straight-up aggressive?

Either way, he didn't answer.

I debated texting Maddox or Kuznetsov. Sometimes Maddox crashed early when we didn't have a game. Kuznetsov was a night owl, though. Would he mind going down to the hotel bar for a "*no I'm totally fine I'm just bored and yes we both know you can see right through me*" beer?

Except what if Devin called or texted?

I'd wait a little longer. If he didn't call or text, well…then I guess I'd figure it out.

I tried to keep myself occupied by watching hockey highlights on YouTube, but I spent more time glancing at the clock than watching the puck or players.

When the clock on my laptop ticked over to ten, he still hadn't called. After that, I didn't bother trying to concentrate anymore.

Well, shit.

Sighing, I put my laptop aside as I let the disappointment sink in. I'd been stood up enough times to know when I was *being* stood up. And now I felt stupid for thinking Devin had actually wanted to put the effort into whatever this was. I was exhausting. According to my ex-girlfriends, dating me was even more exhausting. He'd probably read between the lines, caught on that he'd bitten off more than he wanted to chew, and was ghosting me before he found out what a real headache this could be.

Or maybe he just wasn't interested after all.

Damn. Maybe I'd read more into this than I'd thought.

I scrolled through the texts we'd been exchanging over the last twenty-four hours or so. Had I said something stupid? Something off-putting? Did I read something wrong and respond in a way that would piss him off or, I don't know, freak him out? Tip him off to what he'd be getting into if he hitched his wagon to me? Was it the text about whether we were still on? Should I have just sat tight and waited for him to ping me? Damn it, where was the manual or the fucking YouTube tutorial for this shit? Was I the only one who was this clueless?

I should give up on dating for a while. Focus on hockey. Don't get distracted by—

My phone vibrated, startling me so bad I almost shouted, and I fumbled with my phone enough that I damn near knocked over a lamp trying to recover.

Just seeing Devin's name on the screen sent my heart into overdrive, and then I read his text:

OMG so sorry. Dallas went down with a bad migraine. Call tomorrow?

Oh. *Oh.* Wow, talk about a cascade of mixed feelings. I knew Dallas got migraines, but I'd been so wound up over Devin not calling—so convinced he was ghosting me instead of considering for two seconds that something might have come up—that I hadn't made the connection. Now I felt like an utter dick for thinking he'd blown me off, and I was also relieved as hell that he hadn't blown me off, and I felt like even *more* of a dick for being relieved on any level because, hello, his poor kid had probably been miserable all night. He'd probably been miserable too. What kind of asshole was I to think that was better than Devin just not calling me? I mean, I didn't, but it felt like… Fuck. I was overthinking this, wasn't I?

I also hadn't responded yet.

Sure, sounds good. I'll be around tomorrow. Hope Dallas is feeling better.

He quickly replied, *Great. :) Looking forward to it. She's much better. She's asleep now, and I should get some sleep too.*

Same. Text me when you want to get on FT tomorrow.

Will do. Have a good night.

You too.

And although I was excited as hell to talk to him, and still more than a little nervous about everything because that was how I rolled, relief was the strongest feeling tonight. I'd been wrong. I've overthought the situation, jumped on the worst-case scenario, and then it had turned out Devin was still onboard after all.

Excitement couldn't keep me awake.

Nerves didn't keep me tossing and turning.

Relief knocked me on my ass, and I slept harder than I had in ages.

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CHAPTER 10

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DEVIN

Dallas was still asleep. Last night had been awful, and she'd been racked out all afternoon and probably would be for a few more hours yet. Her school and my office had already bitched me out, but what was I going to do? Send her to school after she'd been up all night in blinding pain? Leave her here by herself so I could go to work, all the while crossing my fingers that she didn't start getting sick and need a trip to the emergency room?

Everyone was just going to have to deal with it until we found a solution to Dallas's migraines.

For the moment, she was sleeping off the hangover, and in between quietly checking on her every hour or so, I tried to get some work done from home.

As I left her bedroom for the third time this afternoon, I stifled a yawn. I desperately needed some coffee, but I didn't dare brew any because the smell would make Dallas sick. Instead, I pulled a Frappuccino out of the fridge; they weren't my favorite thing in the world, but they were less offensive for her than coffee, and I kept them on hand specifically for days like this.

After I'd opened the bottle, I sat on the couch and texted Jase.

Have time to chat?

No answer.

About twenty minutes later, I was just starting to let the disappointment sink in when a response finally came through: *Text or Face?*

He was actually asking if I'd choose to fumble with autocorrect and type out my answers over seeing his gorgeous face? Hello, no-brainer.

FaceTime. Definitely.

In seconds, we were connected, and one look at his face had me more relaxed than I'd been all day. He must've just showered—his dark hair was damp and tousled—and he was lounging against what I assumed were the pillows of his hotel bed.

"Hey." He smiled that smile that made my whole body warm all over. "Good to see you."

"Yeah. You too. And, um, sorry again about last night." I sighed. "Sometimes she just takes her meds and then tries to relax in a quiet, dark room until it's over, but sometimes…" I shook my head. "Last night was rough, let's put it that way."

Jase grimaced. "Ouch. Sorry to hear it. And it's all right. Health stuff comes first, especially when it's your kid. How is she now?"

"She was kind of hungover from it all morning and slept most of the day. She's feeling a lot better now, but she's still asleep. By tomorrow, she should be back to normal."

He whistled. "Wow. One migraine, and she loses two entire days?"

"Oh, it can be three or four days if it's really bad."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. Most of the time, the worst is over in a couple of hours, and then she just feels like she was hit by a truck for the rest of the day."

His eyebrows rose. "And there's nothing anyone can do about it?"

Oh, now that was a line of conversation that could have me on the floor begging for sweet death, so I just gestured

dismissively. “We’re working on it. Slowly but surely.” That was easier than describing the sensation of slamming my forehead against my insurance company and their insistence that I continue to taking Dallas to the barely-mediocre primary care doc they’d assigned her. Ugh.

“Well,” he said, “I hope they can do something for her. That’s got to be miserable for the poor kid.”

“It is.” And I was exhausted tonight, so if we kept talking about Dallas’s health problems, I was going to wind up crying or just being incredibly depressed. “What about you? How was the game last night? I, uh, missed it.”

“Eh, they beat us.” Jase laughed. “You didn’t miss much.”

“Oh, so I missed an off night?”

“Oh my God, yes.” He groaned and rolled his eyes. “We have those nights where we all kinda forget how to play hockey, and last night…” He waved his hand as if to say *do the math*.

I chuckled. “Okay, so you guys *know* about those nights, then.”

Jase laughed and flipped me off. “Yes, we know about those nights. Asshole.”

“I mean, I wasn’t sure! We don’t know what you guys are thinking, so—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Fuck off.”

We both laughed. The Snow Bears were a damn solid team, but on top of having a reputation for falling apart in the third period (especially if they were up), they were also notorious for occasional nights where everything went wrong.

“I gotta know,” I said, “what does your coach say on those nights?”

“Oh, Jesus.” He groaned. “Poor Coach. He’ll do his usual motivational shit while the cameras are on, but as soon as it’s just us and him…” Jase laughed, oblivious to what that did to my pulse. “Oh, God. He just… He stands up in front

of the team, and he just looks at us like, 'Why? Why do you do this to me?'"

I snorted. "Poor guy. No wonder he's bald."

"Yeah, he totally blames us for that. And he's probably not wrong. But to be fair, we also win a lot, so…"

"I guess the good outweighs the bad. Sometimes."

"Hey!"

"I'm kidding! I'm kidding!"

"You better be." He huffed with mock indignance, and dear Lord, this playful side of him was just *adorable*. Turning a little serious, he cleared his throat. "So, um… I'm still on the road for a few more games. But when I get back…" He swallowed.

"Do you still want to, um, meet up?" *Please say yes, please say yes, please say yes*.

"I was gonna ask you the same thing," he said, barely whispering. "Because yeah, I do."

A surge of excitement almost made me forget about the heavy fatigue I was carrying from the long day. "Me too. As soon as possible, actually."

That shy smile. Holy fuck.

"Really?"

"Mmhmm. As long as you do."

"Definitely, yeah." He laughed, looking away from the camera as a hint of color bloomed in his cheeks. "It's all I've been able to think about since the other night."

"Well, that explains last night's game."

A laugh burst out of him, and he looked at me again, mischief sparkling in his eyes. "Right! Exactly. So we need to see each other ASAP so I don't get fired."

"No pressure, right?"

"No, definitely not." He sobered again, and the shift was dramatic. This time he looked really nervous, and he couldn't quite hold the camera's gaze or mine. "In all seriousness, it's been on my mind a lot. I mean, it's like I finally have some clue who I am."

“What do you mean?”

Jase moistened his lips, eyes flicking toward me for just a second before darting away. “I mean, up until literally the moment you kissed me, I was second-guessing if I was gay at all.”

All the breath rushed out of my lungs. “Really?”

Still avoiding my gaze, Jase nodded. “The thing is, I had two ex-girlfriends tell me they thought I must be gay. The first, because I guess I wasn’t so great in bed, and she didn’t think I was into it. Which I wasn’t. So I tried to get better. Do things she liked, get myself into it more, but…” Jase shook his head. “No matter how much I tried, I really just *wasn’t* into it. Then when Lila and I got together, it was different at first. I don’t know, maybe because it was new, or maybe because I hadn’t been touched in so long, I didn’t care who was touching me as long as someone was.”

“But were you attracted to men?”

He seemed to consider it for a moment before he nodded. “Yeah. Not a lot of them. It didn’t even really register at the time, probably because I was so far in denial, but once in a while, some guy would turn my head, and… Yeah. Yeah, I was definitely attracted to men.” He sighed. “But the thing about Lila is that she had a way of getting into my head. Like the first year we dated, she kept making all these little comments about how my game wasn’t so great anymore. She made it sound like she was concerned about my ability to play and how I needed to get out of whatever funk I was in. And I believed her.”

I inclined my head. “Wasn’t that the season the Snow Bears swept the Cup finals?”

Jase nodded. “Yeah. I was second-guessing myself and berating myself the entire time. It took Coach and a couple of my teammates sitting me down and showing me my stats for that season compared to the one before it for me to see that I was playing better than I had in my entire career. But I’d let Lila get under my skin enough that I believed her. So

when I started thinking maybe I really am gay, I kept going back to that and thinking, no, it's just Lila fucking with my head again."

"Whoa," I whispered. "But… why? I mean, why would she do that?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't stick around to figure it out. My buddy's wife thinks it was a power thing. Like a way for her to keep me beaten down and feeling like shit so I'd be grateful she was willing to stay with me. Whatever it was, it fucked me up good. By the time I made it to the other end of that relationship, I didn't even know who I was anymore. And then when Lila 'let it slip'"—he rolled his eyes—"in an interview that she thought I must be gay, suddenly everyone and their mother was talking about it. So she picked it up and ran with it, and she made up all the bullshit about catching me with…hell, I lost track of every guy I supposedly banged during that time. But then the next thing I knew, everyone and their mother was talking about *that*, and asking me about it and talking about it. In between telling me I was a piece of shit for cheating on her. Which I never did with *anyone*." Jase sighed, broad shoulders sagging. "So, like I said, whenever I started wondering if maybe I was gay, or I started thinking about a guy, it was like I'd just shut down. I didn't know if I'd let my ex get under my skin, or if this really was who I am."

"Holy shit," I breathed. "That sounds confusing as hell."

"It was," he said quietly. "So I've been wondering all this time if I was gay or if it was just my ex's mind games." He looked at me. "Now I know."

My heart skipped, but I tried not to let it show. "Better late than never, right?"

"Yeah, at least I finally figured it out." He sighed, rolling his shoulders. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I didn't want to turn this into a bitch session about my ex."

“No, it’s fine. Especially since she’s part of the reason you’ve been confused for so long.” I paused. “Honestly, as long as we can’t be in the same room, we might as well use the time to talk some of this through. Then when we see each other, it’ll already be out on the table, and we can focus on the more fun stuff.”

Jase looked at me, and his faint smile returned. “I like that idea. I mean, I’ll be nervous as fuck when we get to that, but…”

“But you’ll know it’s what you want, right?”

He nodded slowly, and swept his tongue across his full lips. “The thing is, I’ve known for a long time I was attracted to guys. But I never touched one. Not like that. I was attracted to women too—well, sort of—but once I was actually in bed with a girlfriend, I was just…”

“Not into it?”

“Exactly. So I’ve always wondered if it would be that way with men too.”

I considered that for a moment. “When you say you were sort of attracted to women, what does that mean?”

“It’s…” Jase’s eyes lost focus as he gnawed his lip. “Like, I know what an attractive woman looks like, you know?”

“Like, what other guys thought was attractive?”

He pursed his lips, then nodded. “I guess, yeah? It’s hard to explain.”

I thought about it. “Well, I’m not attracted to every conventionally hot man or women who comes along. I know objectively that they’re what people think is attractive, but they don’t do it for me. Then I might meet someone who’s not going to make the cover of Vogue or Men’s Fitness, but leaves me absolutely drooling.” I studied him. “Do, um… Do you ever feel that way about women?”

He was quiet for a long moment. Finally, he shook his head. “No. No, now that you mention it, I think women are beautiful, but no woman—not even the ones I’ve dated—has

ever made my head spin the way, um…" He looked at me. "Not the way some men do."

My heart went wild, and I swallowed. "So maybe you're not into women, then."

"It's starting to feel that way." He laughed humorlessly. "Talk about being confused about myself. I never let myself think I was attracted to men because I didn't want to be gay, and I just assumed I was attracted to women because all the other guys were." He threw up a hand. "Sounds totally normal, doesn't it?"

"In a culture where guys—especially athletes—aren't supposed to be queer?" I shrugged. "Sounds pretty damn normal to me."

"It does?"

"Totally."

"What about you? Are you gay? Bi?

"Bi," I said, "but I'd say I lean more toward men."

"Really?"

"Mmhmm. I dated a guy once who said he's 80/20 bisexual—eighty percent of the people he's attracted to are men. For me, it's probably closer to 60/40. *Maybe* 70/30. Can't give you any kind of rational explanation for it. If I'm in a room full of people, odds are I'll gravitate toward a guy."

"Huh." He furrowed his brow and his eyes lost focus for a moment before he shook his head. "I don't think that's me. I think I'm *definitely* gay."

I smiled. "Well, fortunately you don't have to get it tattooed on. If a woman turns your head, you won't lose your membership or anything."

Jase laughed, which made my skin tingle. "I, um, don't think anyone else is going to be turning my head any time soon. You've got my full attention."

Oh, dear God.

Unaware of me getting ridiculous over him again, he said, "It's just so weird to get this far in life, and not even

know who I am. I even wondered sometimes if I was asexual."

"Why's that?"

He shrugged. "Sex just wasn't that big a deal to me. I'd do it if a girlfriend wanted to, but I didn't usually initiate it, and afterward I usually felt like 'that's it?' So I thought maybe I just wasn't into sex. And I was cool with that." Another shrug. "If I'm ace, I'm ace. But then I'd see a guy who'd make me think, no, I *definitely* want sex. I just want it with him, not with her… and then my mind would start down its spiral of wondering how much of that was me and how much of it was my ex getting into my head, and…" He threw up a hand and laughed humorlessly. "So I've just been confused all this time, and now…" A sweet smile formed on his lips. "For the first time in a long time, I'm not."

"We haven't even slept together, though."

"No, but I really, *really* want to."

Oh dear God. The raw desire in his eyes…that was for me? Holy shit.

"Yeah." I breathed. "Me too."

"I am so fucking nervous about the real thing, though." He wiped a hand over his face and sighed. "I feel like a clueless virgin. I swear, I'm not. I'm just—"

"This is new territory for you. Being with a man, and also being with someone who isn't a toxic little shit like your ex."

He blinked.

"What?" I shrugged unrepentantly. "Am I wrong?"

He laughed softly, shaking his head. "No. No, you are *not* wrong. You just say out loud all the shit that I never can. Because yeah, she was toxic as hell."

"Were you ever happy with her?"

Jase seemed to consider it, then shrugged. "Honestly? Not really. I mean, there was a while in the beginning where we got along and everything, but it never felt…" He

paused. “The thing is, she was really interested in me, and I thought she was gorgeous, and everyone kept talking about how you know you’ve made it as a pro athlete when you’ve got a supermodel girlfriend.” He rolled his eyes. “Except it never felt right. Not even when things were good between us. I felt like I was supposed to be with her, but I didn’t belong with her, if that makes sense.”

I nodded. “Yeah, it does.”

“And then things went to shit, and, well…” He waved a hand. “Now my head is a bigger train wreck than it was when I started dating her, and up until recently, I barely knew who I was.” He quirked a brow. “That sounds insane, doesn’t it? Letting someone fuck up my head that much?”

“Not nearly as insane as you might think.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yeah. I’ve had some exes work me over, too.”

His eyebrows rose and he inclined his head, as if he wanted me to go on.

I took a deep breath. “I had a boyfriend ages ago who basically cheated on me with everyone in town, and then blamed me for it.”

Jase blinked. “He blamed you?”

“Yep. He wouldn’t have cheated if I’d given him more attention, or if I’d put out more, or if the sex had been better, or… Anyway, after I caught him the last time, I went and got tested—again—for everything known to man. It all came back negative, thank God, and he couldn’t understand why I wouldn’t touch him. Obviously he didn’t have any diseases since I didn’t, so what was my problem?”

Jase barked a laugh. “Really? He was that clueless?”

“Totally. So I told him if he really, really wanted to get laid, he could pack his things, get the hell out of my apartment, and go find another piece of ass.”

“And did he?”

“That night. Good riddance. In fact that ex is actually…” I chuckled. “Well, the silver lining is that a couple of shitty

ex-boyfriends are the reason I have Dallas."

Jase tilted his head. "How do you mean?"

"Her mom and I went through some nasty, nasty breakups at the same time. Like, literally a couple of days after I booted out my boyfriend, she finally broke up with hers, because holy shit, that guy was a piece of work. We were drinking and commiserating and drinking even more." I felt myself blushing. "And, um, that's how we ended up with Dallas."

Jase blinked. "Seriously?"

"Mmhmm. Haley and I have never been together. Not like in a relationship, I mean. We moved in together to save money when she was pregnant, and we were basically roommates who co-parented until she met her husband. After they moved in together, we just kept co-parenting from separate apartments."

"Wow. And that worked?"

"Oh yeah. Still does. We never dated and never wanted to, so we never had a breakup. We're basically friends who had a kid together. No split. No custody battle. Nick was a little unsure about it when he came into the picture, but he figured out pretty quickly that it worked great for us and that I was absolutely zero threat to his relationship with Haley."

"Yeah?"

"Yep. But Haley and I have always just been friends. Literally the only reason we ever slept together was because we were shitfaced and pissed off at our exes. We've just never been interested in each other."

"But it worked out with your daughter?"

"Totally." I laughed. "In fact we both agreed that if we were going to end up getting drunk and either knocking someone up or getting knocked up, doing it together was pretty much the best case scenario."

"Really?"

“Well yeah. We get along. There’s no drama between us at all. We’re basically the same as we were before, except we have a kid. It also made it so much easier when she started dating Nick. He was a little guarded at first, but he and I have gotten to be good friends.”

“Wow. So that’s not weird for you? Having another father figure for your kid?”

“Oh God, no.” I shook my head. “I think it’s great. He’s been awesome for her. His work schedule used to be a lot more flexible than mine or Haley’s, so for a long time, he was the one to pick up Dallas from school when she had a migraine. He takes her to medical appointments—things like that.” I chuckled. “I couldn’t have asked for a better woman to accidentally have a kid with, and I couldn’t have asked for a better guy to be her husband. We’ve all lucked out, believe me.”

“Yeah, it sounds like it. Must take off a lot of pressure, everyone getting along like that. I’ve got teammates who’ve had some ugly divorces and breakups, and it gets really bad when they have kids together.”

“That’s exactly what I was afraid of with Haley, but like I said, I got lucky. Life’s too short for that shit, you know?”

“Oh yeah. I’m glad I never had kids with my girlfriends because…” He let a grimace finish the thought.

“Uh-huh, I’ve dated some people where we definitely dodged the parenting bullet. It would’ve been messy as fuck with some of them.”

“I bet.” He glanced off-camera, and he sighed. “Damn it. I didn’t realize how late it was getting.” He looked at me again. “I need to get some sleep. But…talk again soon?”

As disappointed as I was to be bringing our conversation to a close, my heart quickened at the mere suggestion of doing this again. “Definitely. Just give me a heads up when you’ll have some time. And I’ll, um, try to message you and let you know if I can’t make it. Sorry again for disappearing on you last night.”

That smile was going to be the death of me. No doubt about it.

“It’s all good. I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Yeah. Talk to you soon.”

After we’d ended the call, I put my phone on the end table to charge, and I sat back on the couch, still grinning like a fool. We’d talked through some tough things tonight—some things he probably didn’t talk about with just anyone—and I swore that had my head spinning faster than the long kiss we’d exchanged in his car. It was one thing to make out with an incredibly sexy man. It was another thing entirely for him to feel safe enough to show cards he didn’t like people seeing.

It was way, way too early to read much into this, but I didn’t care. I let myself ride this high and enjoy the possibility that we had a real connection.

A door closed at the end of the hall, bringing me out of my thoughts, and I looked up as Dallas shuffled into the living room. Her face was pale except for the dark circles under her eyes, and her sweats and T-shirt were rumpled. With her hair pulled back into a messy ponytail like that, she reminded me a little of her mom during our hard-partying college days, when she’d regret a lot of her decisions about tequila consumption the morning after. At least Haley had had fun before diving into misery of her own making. This poor kid was just trying to exist.

“Hey.” I grimaced up at her. “How are you feeling?”

“Eh.” She made a face. “Like crap.”

“I’m sorry. How’s your head?”

“Just kinda throbbing right now.”

That much was a relief. The headaches were no joke, and sometimes they came in waves. Tonight, it had been about eighteen hours since the pain had throttled back to something bearable, and usually once that much time had passed, she felt better and stayed that way. At least until the next one came along.

“You feel like eating anything?”

Her eyes lost focus as she seemed to consider it. Maybe because she was still queasy, maybe because the hangover left her feeling like her brain was barely running on two cylinders. Maybe both. Finally, she nodded. “Something light, I guess?”

“Okay.” I pushed myself up. “Cold or hot?”

Another long silence. “Cold. Cereal sounds good.”

“Good thing I bought milk yesterday.”

She smiled faintly. While she took a seat at the kitchen table, I poured us both a couple of bowls of Cheerios. Wasn’t her favorite thing or mine, but it was one of the least offensive things for her to eat or smell when she was recuperating.

We didn’t talk much while we ate. That was to be expected. By tomorrow, she’d probably be back to normal, so I wasn’t worried. I was relieved, in fact, especially because she was eating like she had a real appetite. That was always a good sign.

“Do you think you’ll be okay to go to school tomorrow?” I asked.

She swallowed a spoonful of cereal. “I think so.”

I nodded. “Okay. In the morning, if you’re not, then don’t push it, but for now I’ll assume you’re going.”

She nodded too.

After we’d finished eating, she went back to bed while I cleaned up our handful of dishes. Then I returned to the couch, and I sent my boss an email saying I would most likely be in, but there was a chance I’d have to either work from home or take another day. Just depended on how Dallas felt.

Before I’d even hit send, I could already hear him grumbling and complaining about me being “unreliable” and how difficult it was to deal with my “unpredictable schedule.” Ugh. Today was yet another one of those days when I wished I could walk into my boss’s office, tell him

what a piece shit he was, and walk out without looking back. I'd fantasized about it millions of times, and nothing made those fantasies more vivid or tempting than the asshole's guilt trippy responses whenever I had to call in.

"We've all got families to take care of, but we need you here at the office."

"This many sick days aren't going to look good on your annual review."

Or, as he'd said this morning, "We've got clients coming in today. Can't her mother look after her?"

Ugh. Fuck him. Haley or Nick would have loved to take care of Dallas today, but none of our companies had particularly generous policies for taking time off, and we were doing the best we could. None of us ever called in sick for ourselves unless we were on death's door (something our coworkers understandably resented), but Nick had burned several days with a nasty case of the flu earlier this year. Haley's company was even more draconian about taking sick leave, and she was out of PTO until the next fiscal year. That meant that for the next few months, I was the only one with any flexibility to stay home with Dallas, and my boss made sure to remind me at every turn how inconvenient that was.

Yeah, sorry I have a kid who's chronically ill, asshat. Can't imagine how difficult that must be for you.

I glanced at my phone, and my stomach twisted as I recalled my earlier FaceTime conversation with Jase. I'd loved it, and it felt like we'd broken a lot of ice and gotten to know each other, but now… Fuck.

My boss barely tolerated the realities of me being a parent to a child who needed extra care, and the fact was, potential partners weren't much better. I'd dated people before who'd jumped ship once they realized I wasn't just an every-other-weekend single dad. Those who could handle dating a guy with fifty percent custody always seemed to bail once the rubber met the road and they

understood that my daughter's medical issues were a bigger deal than "she gets headaches sometimes." My relationships rarely lasted long enough for us to torpedo things for the usual reasons, like incompatibility or a wandering eye. All it usually took was one or two dates being interrupted or some plans being derailed for them to decide this was more than they bargained for, and they'd be gone.

There were days when I understood, and today was one of those days. No one eagerly signed up for health issues—their own or a loved one's—that slammed the pause button on their lives at random times. Dallas sure as shit hadn't volunteered for it. Neither had her mom, stepdad, or I. But the three of us were there for her because we were her parents and of course were going to take care of our kid. There was no question.

Sometimes, though, I secretly wondered if Nick would have stuck around if he'd met Haley after Dallas's migraines had started. He was as devoted to her as if she were his own kid, but I knew the stress wore him down as much as it did Haley or me. The financial strain, the constant fear of an employer deciding they'd had enough, and of course the utterly draining helplessness of watching your kid in excruciating pain that you couldn't do a damn thing to fix—it took a toll on everyone, and it had definitely put their marriage to the test more than once.

Haley had even admitted to me in confidence once that our split custody arrangement was probably the best possible thing for the three of us. While it didn't do a damn thing to help Dallas—God, nothing did—it at least gave the adults a break so we were rested and ready to help when she was in pain. It was the kind of raw admission we couldn't make to other parents without them thinking we resented our child or that we wanted a break from her. Seemed like the only people who understood were those who'd been in similar trenches. It was perfectly okay to

admit that newborns were exhausting or that teenagers were why some animals ate their young, but heaven help anyone who said out loud that being the parent of a child with health problems was its own special hell.

I was thankful beyond words that Dallas's medical issues weren't more serious. They weren't life-threatening and there were other far more painful and terrible things she could be coping with than unpredictable and debilitating migraines. But that was only so comforting when I was holding her while she tried desperately not to cry because crying would only make the already unbearable pain worse. It only did so much when I was barely staying upright because I couldn't sleep when she was in that much pain, and that pain lasted for hours. Sometimes days.

I loved my kid more than anything in the world. I would walk through fire for her without a second thought. But that didn't mean the fire wouldn't burn me, and it didn't mean that any of this was easy. It was hard. It was fucking exhausting. I wouldn't wish it on any child, and I wouldn't wish it on any parent.

Which made dating a delicate issue.

I had to ask myself every time if I was willing to bring a new person into this endless cycle.

And they had to ask themselves if they were willing to join it. If being with me was worth the package deal.

For a lot of people—for the majority of the people I'd dated—the answer was no. If they could get past me being a single dad, then the rest ended up being too much, and before too long, it would be just me and Dallas again. I could almost set my watch by it these days.

So where did that leave things with Jase?

We had a connection. Maybe it was just sexual, and this thing would start and end in the bedroom. I could live with that. But what if it was more?

He'd known from the start about Dallas's migraines. He'd bent over backwards to make sure she finally got to

watch a hockey game for her birthday, but there was a big difference between a one-time thing for a fan, and committing to something ongoing.

I closed my eyes and sighed.

Is it really too much to ask for something that lasts?

Leaning my head back against the couch, I stared up at the ceiling, exhaustion clinging to my bones and pulling down on my shoulders. I knew why people didn't stick around. I got it. But goddamn, it hurt, and it was lonely as fuck, and just like it did every time I met someone, the same question burned hot in my mind:

This one *time, can I be worth the price of admission?*

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CHAPTER 11

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JASE

This was where I was at my calmest—on the ice.

Charging toward the opposing team's goal, keeping an eye on my teammates as I kept the guy next to me from snatching the puck off my stick, I was all focus and all hockey. Get the puck. Pass it. Shoot it. Don't let an opposing player get it. If they did get it, don't let them keep it. Move the puck toward their goal and away from ours. Get the puck. Pass it. Shoot it.

Nothing else existed. Nothing else mattered. Sometimes when I was on the bench between my shifts, my mind would try to wander away from the game and the arena, but hockey was fast and chaotic, and that held my focus and, with very rare exceptions, didn't leave space for worrying about anything else.

From warm-ups until the buzzer, I was calm and focused. Kind of ironic, given how much pressure I was under out here, but I wondered sometimes if that was part of it. There was a ton of pressure, but it was pressure to do something I was good at, and it mostly distracted me from anything else in the world. All the other shit on my mind? I left that at the locker room door, and for the next few hours, nothing existed but hockey. Just the way I liked it.

But games didn't last forever, and as it always did sooner or later, the buzzer sounded.

We'd lost this one by a single goal. Disappointing, but losses happened.

In the locker room, I quickly stripped off my gear, grabbed a towel, and went in to get a shower before the reporters started crowding in for post-game interviews. I could handle them, but not right away. Thank God my coaches and teammates understood. If I tried to face reporters now, I'd be a fucking wreck, so the guys always covered for me and gave me some time.

In the shower, I let the water beat the back of my neck and shoulders, and I flattened my palm against the cool wall as I reminded myself again and again to breathe slowly and deeply. There was nothing to have a breakdown over, and the shaky, panicky feeling was just my brain resetting after a game. Nothing was wrong. Nothing was *ever* wrong, but the first few times this had happened during my college hockey days, I'd fallen apart, so I'd learned quickly to just breathe and talk myself through it.

This was the worst part of the night. Whether we won or lost, the post-game crash was never fun. It was like I'd been amped up all night, running on pure adrenaline, and now that the game was over, the adrenaline dropped out from under me.

This was the part where my brain caught up. Thoughts started crashing in about everything I'd done wrong during the game. Relief hit me because I didn't need to be nervous about the game anymore—about screwing up for my team in front of dozens of cameras and thousands of people—but it was like I'd put those nerves on pause as soon as I'd hit the ice, and now they needed to run their course. And on top of that, everything else that kept my mind going ninety miles an hour when I wasn't playing hockey? All that shit restarted as soon as the game was over. Hockey was a nice break from worrying about money, a noise my car was making, if I'd left something on at home, if someone might break into my condo or car while I was gone, my

relationship (whatever it was) with Devin, and usually a handful of alarming headlines that I'd caught while perusing social media. The problem was when hockey was over and the dam broke again, and all those worries slammed into my brain the way defensemen sometimes slammed me into the glass.

Why am I the only one who has to do this? I asked myself every damned night. *What the hell is wrong with me?*

I never had come up with an answer to that.

Eventually, just like I always did, I pulled myself together, shut off the shower, and put on a pair of gym shorts. As soon as I stepped into the locker room, the reporters, camera lenses, and microphones were in my face.

"Can you tell us what went through your mind during the last two minutes of the second period?" one asked. "Did you expect it to play out that way?"

The last two minutes of the second period may as well have happened last week. That was the other shitty part of my post-game comedown—it made the time between the game and the pressers stretch out and feel like days or weeks instead of half an hour.

But I'd learned a long time ago how to provide bullshit answers that got the job done without tipping my hand too far. That also kept these interviews blessedly short instead of dragging them out until I had to pull myself down again.

Forcing a nervous smile, I shrugged. "It's the same plan with any play—get the puck away from our goal and into theirs. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't."

"What about in the third period?" another reporter pushed her microphone closer to my face, probably unaware of how much that made my skin crawl. "It looked like your line had a solid play in the works, but then it all fell apart. What happened there?"

“We just didn’t play it as cleanly as we should’ve. And the—” *Shit, who did we play tonight?* “The other team was on their game, so they got the puck away from us.”

The questions kept going for another ten minutes, and finally, they all started pulling away to grill Coach and a few of my other teammates. Once I was absolutely sure I was clear of every camera and hot mic, I released a breath and rolled my shoulders. Then I toweled off my back and neck, which were sweaty from the interview. There were rumors that I never wore a shirt during post game pressers because I was just vain and liked the way I looked on-camera. And some of the guys did wait to put on shirts until after the pressers for exactly that reason.

With me? The truth was, the interviews made me sweat, and it was less obvious if I was shirtless and had just stepped out of the shower. Plus it meant I didn’t have to swap out my T-shirt after the interview. My teammates were way more relaxed about all this than I was, so they could go either way, but no, I had to strategize and plan every goddamned thing so I didn’t have to change my shirt after every interview.

As if the games themselves weren’t exhausting enough.

Bright and early the next morning, our team’s jet took off, and we all settled in for the five-hour flight to San Diego for tomorrow night’s game.

Beside me, Kuznetsov closed his eyes and breathed deeply as he white-knuckled the armrest.

As the plane leveled out, I asked, “You good?”

Eyes still closed, he swallowed hard and nodded. “Yeah.”

“Hang in there, man.” I gave his forearm a friendly squeeze. “You want me to get you a drink when they come around?”

Another nod.

Most of us didn't drink much during the season, aside from partying now and then or a glass of something with dinner. But just like everyone accepted that I needed half an hour to pull my head together after a game, we all knew that Kuznetsov needed a drink or two to get him through a flight. He never got drunk, and he rarely had more than that second drink, but he was *terrified* of flying. Maybe self-medicating wasn't the best thing for him, but until someone came up with a healthier way to get a player from Point A to Point B without falling apart, none of us were going to give him grief for a little alcohol.

When the flight attendant came by, I got some water for myself and a Seven & Seven for Kuznetsov. After a couple of sips, he started to slowly relax just like he always did. I'd still keep an eye on him—turbulence didn't bother me, but it could have him hyperventilating in no time. I didn't know how he coped with all the constant flying throughout the year. He insisted it was just something he had to knuckle through if he wanted to play hockey, so he dealt with it, but I wasn't so sure I'd have been able to weather it like he did. He had his limits, though—there was a reason he paid for his parents to come visit during the off season instead of flying to Russia to visit them himself. And he flew them first class the whole way, so they didn't complain.

While Kuznetsov kept himself as calm as he could at thirty-some-odd thousand feet, I sipped my water and watched some of my other teammates. In particular, Jameson.

He was two rows up from me in a rear-facing seat, and like he often did on road trips, he'd brought his nine-year-old son along. They were, as usual, spending the flight doing his homework, and I quietly watched as Jameson patiently walked Liam through a spelling assignment.

It was kind of funny, the difference between Jameson the hockey player and Jameson the dad. On the ice, he had a

hot temper—there was a fading bruise on the side of his face from a fistfight last week—and he was the first to get on a teammate's case for fucking up. If he passed someone the puck for an easy shot on goal, and the other player blew the opportunity, they'd have words in the locker room, if not right there on the ice. It was annoying, and Coach had been on his case about it more than once, but we'd all kind of learned to live with it.

With Liam, Jameson was soft-spoken and never let any annoyance show through at all.

"It's okay, buddy." He gave his son a gentle shoulder squeeze. "Those words are tricky. Here." He turned the paper over. "Try them again. Don't worry—you'll get them."

Across the aisle, Maddox had his earbuds in and his eyes closed. Sometimes he brought one of his four kids with him, and they'd done homework on flights too. Just like Jameson, he was endlessly calm and patient, which was almost comical compared to the hothead he too was on the ice.

I pulled my gaze away from my teammates and checked on Kuznetsov. He was still tense, but holding steady, and he was only about a third of the way through his drink. As long as the flight stayed smooth, he'd probably be all right.

I glanced at Maddox and Jameson, then took out my phone and thumbed through some of the messages Devin and I had been exchanging the last couple of days. There was definitely something going on between us, and I wasn't going to lie—it scared the hell out of me. I hadn't been with a man before. It was so easy in the moment, but when I was by myself and started thinking about it, my pulse started pumping, but not the same way it did when Devin's lips brushed mine.

And it wasn't just because Devin was a man.

I glanced at Jameson and Liam, who were taking a break from homework and playing a game on an iPad. They were super cute together, but watching them right now made my stomach tight.

I'd never dated anyone with kids. It hadn't been deliberate—just, none of the women I'd ever dated had kids.

Now here was Devin. A single dad.

I didn't dislike kids. In fact, I loved kids. One of my favorite events every year was when local youth hockey teams came to the arena to skate with us and pick up a few tips from the pros. I'd taught both of my ex-girlfriend's nieces how to skate, and whenever my teammates brought their kids to practice, I always played with them. I'd only interacted with Dallas the night she'd come to watch us play, and I already adored her.

But there was a big difference between entertaining kids on the ice or teaching them how to skate and being a parent. Or a stepparent. Or a parent's boyfriend.

How do I explain to Devin that I want to date him, but I'm not stepparent material because I can barely take care of myself?

Because seriously, I sucked at pretty much everything that wasn't hockey. I was beyond fortunate I didn't have to worry about money, but that didn't stop me from worrying about it. I agonized over spending anything because I was afraid of losing that financial security. In an effort to push myself past that fear and to drive home the fact that I didn't have a double-digit bank balance like I had through most of college, I'd splurged on a three hundred thousand dollar car. I'd paid cash for it, and still had plenty of money left over and more coming in…and damn if I didn't lose sleep for ages afterward, wondering if I'd just made a colossal mistake.

I'd had the car for three years and could still nauseate myself over that purchase. Plus I'd suddenly discovered that owning a car with a six-figure price tag meant parking that car in places where I'd been nervous parking my old Toyota. That was why I'd gone and—after a bit more hyperventilating about spending money—bought a used

Prius that I could at least leave in a parking lot without giving myself a coronary.

Aside from money, I found plenty more of things to worry about. I could remember three separate occasions where I was a train wreck during a game because I'd convinced myself I'd left a faucet on, that I hadn't completely shut off the gas stove, or that I might have left something too close to a heater vent. The time I'd freaked out over the gas stove, I'd managed to get in touch with a neighbor who went by to check on it for me, and once she'd texted to say it was all clear I'd been fine. The other two times, no one had been available to check, so I'd been a mental disaster until I'd come home and found the faucet off or the heaters completely clear just like they always were. Sometimes I even thought about ditching the condo and buying a house solely because at least then if I did do something stupid, I'd only burn down or flood my own place.

For five solid days of a two-and-a-half week road trip, I'd been a mess because of a constant undercurrent of worry that I'd forgotten to lock my car in the airport parking lot. I'd finally called the lot and asked someone to check it for me, and even after they'd reassured me it was locked (not to mention inside their secure lot), it had taken me hours to calm the hell down.

I was *just* capable of taking care of myself most of the time without stressing myself into a heart attack. Pets or houseplants weren't an option even if I wasn't on the road all the time.

So who in their right mind would trust me with any responsibility for a *kid*? I could show her how to skate or maybe help with some of the academic stuff that I'd done all right with, but the endless patience? The 24/7 role model? Knowing what she needed emotionally? Being the functional adult for the kid to look up to?

Sweat trickled down the back of my neck, and I exhaled as I wiped it away.

The thought of being a boyfriend had always intimidated me. Being a boyfriend to a dad? Holy shit. How much would he expect me to be involved with his kid? And how quickly would he see that I wasn't the right guy for him once he saw me do more than sign a few autographs and pose for some pictures with Dallas? Was there any point in seeing where things went between me and him when I was probably a deal-breaker waiting to happen?

I was getting way ahead of myself. Devin and I had flirted via text and on the phone. We'd spent a few amazing minutes kissing in my car. For all I knew, we'd fuck a couple of times, the chemistry would fizzle out, and we'd move on long before Devin's daughter and my utter inadequacy as a potential stepparent ever entered the equation.

But logic wouldn't stop me from sweating over it. It never did.

By the time I settled into my hotel room that night, my mind was its usual constant barrage of worry and stress. This thing I was doing with Devin wasn't helping.

But damn, the second his face appeared on the screen for a FaceTime call, it was like when I stepped into the chute for a game—everything else was just gone. I could work myself into a shaking mess over him between interactions, the same way I could over hockey, but once we were face-to-face—or close to it—I laser-focused.

What could I say? Those eyes and that smile just did it for me, and they screwed with my concentration enough that I forgot about everything else.

Forget all the reasons this probably won't work. I can't believe how much I want you.

Devin was lounging on his bed from the looks of it, one hand behind his head while the other held his phone. "So where are you tonight?"

"San Diego." I lay back against the pillows on my hotel bed. "At least we got in early enough to sleep before tomorrow's game."

"It does seem like they cut it close for you guys sometimes."

"Oh my God, you have no idea." I groaned and rolled my eyes. "Nothing like trying to play hockey when you're jetlagged and sleep-deprived."

"Ugh."

I laughed. "Eh, it's part of the job."

"Well, I'll try not to keep you up too late before home games." He winked, and my entire body tingled in response. "But no promises."

"Yeah?"

He shrugged. "I mean, I'll try, but if we get carried away…"

The thought of getting carried away with Devin sounded amazing. I didn't even care how I felt when I laced up my skates the next night. Something told me it would be worth it.

"I, um…" I cleared my throat. "That sounds like it might be worth being tired the next day."

"If that night in your car is anything to go by, it'll be worth nodding off at my desk."

I laughed nervously as my cock hardened. "So no pressure, right?"

"None at all." Devin shifted a little, discomfort flickering across his face.

"You all right?"

"Oh, yeah." He sounded breathless. "At the risk of sounding incredibly crude, I know what I'll be doing as

soon as we're done with this call."

Oh my God. As if I wasn't already getting painfully hard.

Before I could stop myself, I said, "Why wait until we're done?" My heart went wild. Holy shit. Had I just said that out loud? Oh, damn, now things were going to get weird, and—

"You want to watch me jerk off?" The way he said it was laced with surprise, not disgust, and it sounded a hell of a lot like an invitation. The way his arm was moving, he may have already been halfway there, touching himself just off-camera as if he needed relief as much as I did.

"I, um…" I licked my lips. "Yeah. I do."

His grin made my spine tingle. The camera blurred with rapid motion, then stilled as he—I thought—propped it up on his nightstand. He paused to peel off his T-shirt, which didn't do a damn thing to calm me down, especially when he lay back against the pillows. His hair was light enough it was almost invisible on camera, giving his chest and flat abs a smooth look.

With one knee canted to the side, he unbuckled his belt and unzipped his fly. I held my breath, blood pounding so hard in my ears I almost missed the subtle groan as he touched himself. After a couple of slow strokes, he looked right at me. "Like the view?"

I nodded, completely mute. I was surprised he wasn't enormous like some of the guys I'd seen in porn. In fact, he was about the same size as me. Sweet—one less thing to be self-conscious about. Just knocking something out of the *shit to work myself up over* category let me breathe easier and get even more into this.

Not that I needed help getting into it. No porno I'd ever watched could come close to watching Devin lounging on the bed, stroking his own dick. He was hot, but he was also someone I knew. Someone I'd kissed, and exchanged racy texts with, and actually had a chance in hell of touching for real. If I could keep myself from screwing this up somehow,

that could be my hand sliding up and down his thick shaft. That could be my cock, hard as fuck while he stroked it like that.

This wasn't just a fantasy—it was a *preview*.

"I'm not gonna lie, Jase," he whispered. "This is not the first time I've done this thinking about you."

I bit my lip. "Yeah?"

He nodded slowly as his hand kept moving. I rubbed my own cock through my jeans. Not enough to make myself come, but enough to take the edge off before I lost my mind. I seriously couldn't remember ever being this turned on. Maybe it was a good thing we were doing this on-camera—if we were in the same room, I'd probably go up in flames or something.

"Goddamn…" He squeezed his eyes shut and let his head fall back, and my God, I was fascinated by his throat. I wanted to taste every inch of his neck, run my lips over his collarbones, maybe bite his shoulder and see what kinds of sounds he made. Eyes still closed, he moaned, "Ungh. Jase. I want this to be your hand *so bad*."

I couldn't speak. I'd run out of air.

He furrowed his brow as he pushed out a ragged breath, and the muscles on his forearm stood out as he stroked himself faster. "Oh fuck. I'm gonna come."

"Yeah?" I managed.

"Uh-huh." He was out of breath, and when he met my gaze with heavy-lidded eyes, I swear I almost came in my pants even before he whispered, "You want me to?"

I nodded. "Yeah. I do."

God, yes, baby. Let me see you come.

Devin bit his lip and closed his eyes again, tilting his head back as he pumped himself a little harder. Then he arched his back, thrusting into his own fist, and he gasped as cum erupted from his cock.

Oh, fuck. Money shots had never done anything for me when I'd watched porn, but watching Devin come almost

made *me* come too.

And I ever thought for a second that I wasn't gay?

"So…" Devin licked his lips and looked at the camera with smoldering, heavy-lidded eyes. "Any chance I can watch you?"

My stomach somersaulted. Nerves tried to intervene with no, fuck no, absolutely not, but damn it, I *wanted* him to watch me. "You, um… You want to?"

"Are you kidding?" He grinned as he cleaned the cum off his hand and stomach. "If I can't have the real thing right now…"

Oh…holy…

"Um." I cleared my throat. "Okay. Yeah. Just, um…" I glanced down at myself. "Hang on. Let me get situated."

"Take your time. I'm not going anywhere."

Pulse racing, I set the phone aside and stripped off my shirt. I debated just unzipping my pants, but to hell with it—I took them off too. Then I set up my phone like he had, putting it on the nightstand so my hands were free and he had a good view.

And then, completely naked, I lay back against the pillows with my hand around my cock. This was a lot more exposed than being naked in bed with someone, because I had nothing to cover me at all. He had a panoramic view, and I couldn't distract him with a kiss or jerk him off or something—this was all visual for him, and I had a split second to be hardcore self-conscious about it before Devin bit his lip and murmured, "Whoa. I knew you were hot, but… *Whoa*."

I laughed, a little self-conscious and a lot relieved. "Yeah?"

"Uh-huh. Good God. You've got a body that is *criminally* gorgeous."

I chuckled. "Criminally? You make it sound like a bad thing."

“Nope. Not bad. A little dangerous, maybe, but not bad at all.”

“Nothing dangerous about me.” I winked. “Unless you’re a hockey player.”

“Yeah, we’ll see what happens when I get you into bed. We might need to have the paramedics on standby. Or the fire department.”

I just laughed again, some warmth rushing into my cheeks. I’d never heard Devin this flustered, and I’d never had anyone get flustered over me. It was weird, but it was heady as hell.

And he’d wanted a show, hadn’t he? That was the whole point of this? Plus I was so turned on, I needed to get off, so what was I waiting for?

I started stroking my dick a little harder, and my hips bucked like they had a mind of their own. “Goddamn, I might come too fast.”

“No such thing as too fast,” Devin murmured. “If you’re that turned on, I want to *see* it.”

“Oh, God,” I moaned, letting my head fall back as I kept pumping myself. I could usually take forever when I jerked off, just enjoying it because why the hell not, but not this time. With Devin watching me, I should’ve been too nervous to stay hard, but instead I was too turned on to hold back.

“Fuck, that’s even hotter than what I’ve been imagining.”

I bit back a whimper. “Y-yeah? You’ve been… What’ve you been imagining?”

“Everything,” he said in a hoarse whisper. “I don’t think you understand how much I want you.”

“Oh God…” My back arched, and I was so, so ready to come, but I made myself keep riding that edge just so he’d keep talking dirty. “Tell… Tell me.”

Devin’s his voice was low and husky as he said, “Let’s just say if I were there right now, you wouldn’t have to

worry about getting a single drop of cum on anything."

Instantly, my brain was flooded with images of him sucking my dick or me thrusting into his ass, and my hips jerked as I ground out "*fuck!*" and came all over my hand and stomach.

"Shit, that's hot," Devin purred, and I was surprised by how self-conscious I *didn't* feel right then. Naked, a total mess, my hand on my dick—and Devin was watching me like he wanted to eat me alive.

"We, um…" I paused to grab a tissue, and as I started wiping off my hand, I looked at him. "We really need to do this in person."

"Uh-huh." He sounded as dazed as I felt. "The sooner the better."

Fuck yeah, the sooner the better.

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CHAPTER 12

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DEVIN

Watching Snow Bears hockey was never going to be the same again.

Less than twenty-four hours after that amazingly hot FaceTime exchange, I lounged on my couch with a cold beer in my hand, watching Jase and his team tearing up the ice. He'd just scored, and the camera followed him as he pumped his fist and skated into a three-way hug with two of his teammates. It was always a thrill when the team scored, but this time, my body reacted… Well, like I hadn't just watched a hockey goal, let's put it that way. Jase was still absolutely the same amazing hockey player he'd been the night he'd scored that hat trick, but I couldn't look at him the same way.

And the sight of him sweaty and out of breath? Oh dear God, that did things to me it never had before. I mean, I'd fantasized about him, but there was something way hotter about him now when I'd actually seen him turned on and getting off. The thought of making him sweat like that? Running my fingers through his hair while he was shaking and out of breath? Fuck, yes.

I took a swig of beer to cool myself down, and an uncomfortable knot formed behind my ribs.

My newfound outlook on Jase wasn't as simple as having a shot with an incredibly hot man.

Stomach tight, I slid my gaze over to the armchair where Dallas was curled up in a well-worn Jase Kelly jersey with Tony in her lap, and that knot in my chest didn't budge.

Jase was her favorite athlete. Now he was also the man I was… Okay, I wasn't sure if "dating" was the word, but there was something going on here, and how exactly was I supposed to tell my daughter this? And when? Except there wasn't much to tell at this point. Jase and I were still kind of circling the bed and hadn't spent much time together outside of calls. For all I knew, this thing would fizzle out in a week and that would be the end of it.

But what happened if Jase and I dated for real, and then it all fell apart? I'd had relationships that were great at the time, but then ended badly. There were men and women I'd loved and now wouldn't speak to if my house was on fire and they were 911 dispatchers. Who was to say that wouldn't happen with Jase?

And if it did…

Dallas *adored* Jase. He was her rock star. The kid had so many limitations on things she could do and enjoy, and I would feel like the world's biggest jackass if I did something to ruin her enjoyment of hockey or tarnish Jase in her eyes.

I had very carefully never let her catch on that some of my previous partners had left because they couldn't cope with life revolving around migraines. There was no way in hell I'd ever let her believe any of this was her fault, because it absolutely wasn't, and I promised myself here and now that I would be extra careful to shield her from it if that was why things eventually ended between Jase and me. And I'd do whatever it took to keep things amicable no matter what, even if it meant splitting prematurely before we had a chance to resent each other.

Could I be so sure about that, though? There'd been partners in the past who I'd been friends with before we'd

dated, and I'd sworn we'd stay friends if we broke up, and now I hoped I never saw them again. That was literally why Haley and I had both refused to consider getting married or even dating after she got pregnant—we hadn't been interested in each other like that anyway, but mostly we'd both had too many friends-turned-partners-turned-asshole-exes, and we didn't want to risk losing each other.

So I knew how easily the best of intentions could go up in smoke once a relationship reached the end of its shelf life.

I turned my attention back to the screen, and the camera followed Jase up the ice as he and two other forwards shot the puck back and forth.

He's a hockey star. He might become my boyfriend. He's her hero.

How do I do this without hurting my daughter?

Fuuuck I had no clue.

Maybe this was just physical and that was all it would ever be, but it was real and it was intense. At the very least, I wanted to be friends with him.

So how did I do this?

Maybe what I needed was some advice from someone who wouldn't hesitate to tell me if I was being a dipshit.

~

On Sunday night, I drove Dallas over to her mom's place. Like I often did, I came upstairs with her. That was partly to catch up with Haley and Nick about everything relating to our daughter, but also because it was a chance to visit my best friend and her husband.

Dallas let us into the apartment, and as we toed off our shoes by the door, her stepdad poked his head out of the living room.

"Oh, hey," Nick said. "How's it going?"

“Not bad.” I pushed my shoes up against the others. “You?”

“Eh, you know how it goes. Trying to fight the temptation to dunk the boss in the water cooler.”

I laughed. “Oh. Yeah. I feel that one.” We fist-bumped. “Mine’s trying to get a promotion right now, so he’s extra insufferable.”

Nick wrinkled his nose. “No, thank you.”

Right then, Haley appeared in the doorway. “Hey, Devin.” To Dallas, she said, “How are you feeling?”

“Good.” Dallas shrugged. “The last few days have been good.” She made a face. “Except I had to take my meds on Tuesday, so that sucked.”

Haley’s brow pinched. “Yeah? Did they help?”

Dallas nodded. “They just make me feel kinda…blah.”

“Better than the alternative, right?” I asked.

“Way better.”

“Okay, well, hopefully that means this dose is working.” Haley glanced at her phone. “You’ve still got a couple of hours before bed. Do you have homework?”

Dallas groaned. “I always have homework.”

“Well.” Haley nodded down the hallway. “You know what to do.”

Our daughter sighed theatrically. “Okay, okay.” To me, she said, “Good night, Dad.”

“Good night,” I said. “I’ll see you next Sunday.”

“See you Sunday.” Then Dallas headed to her bedroom to get started on her schoolwork.

Nick, Haley, and I went into the kitchen to catch up on everything, including the latest migraine issues. The medication had worked this week, so we all crossed our fingers that pattern held. The real test would be this upcoming week, since the days leading up to her period could be the worst. And beyond all things medical, Nick and Haley were taking care of the parent-teacher conferences at the end of the month, and they’d update me

if there was anything significant. I was on dentist detail the week after that, so I'd keep them posted if she needed fillings or if anyone made noise about braces again (hahaha, paid for with exactly what?).

Once we were all on the same page, Nick went back into the living room, and Haley walked with me to the front door.

After I'd put on my shoes, I reached for the doorknob, but hesitated. "Listen, um… Before I go, can I talk to you about something?"

"Sure." She tucked her blond hair behind her ear and watched me. "What's up?"

"Well. Um." I cleared my throat. "So I've started seeing someone."

Her face lit up. "Oh yeah? That's great!"

"It is. But…" I dropped my gaze.

"What's the problem? Is there something wrong with this guy?"

"No, no, there's nothing wrong with him. Not a damn thing. God, he's…" I sighed. "He's amazing."

Haley shifted her weight and tilted her head. "But…?"

I swallowed, glancing down the hall toward Dallas's bedroom. Then I met her mom's gaze and quietly said, "Look, I need this to stay between us. Like, I need you to swear on all that's holy that you won't repeat this. Not even to Nick or Dallas."

Her eyes widened. "Okay, I won't repeat it. But, uh, why?"

"For privacy reasons. *His* privacy." I hesitated, then lowered my voice, "Because I'm seeing Jase Kelly."

"Jase—" Her jaw fell open, and she whispered, "As in, *Jase Kelly?* Are you *serious?*"

Face hot, I nodded. "Yeah. Jase Kelly."

She stared at me. "How… How…" Haley shook herself. "How did you score Jase Kelly?"

I laughed. “Um, excuse me. You don’t have to rub it in that I’m batting out of my league.”

“That’s not what I meant!” She rolled her eyes. “I mean, you two don’t exactly run in the same circles. Did you match on Tinder or something?”

“No, we didn’t match on Tinder.” I huffed with exaggerated indignance before turning serious. “It was that thing he put together for Dallas. With the team? We emailed back and forth a bit before that, and then we just kind of…didn’t stop.”

Haley put a hand to her chest. “Oh my God. That is *seriously* adorable. You guys officially have the best how-we-met story ever.”

I could feel myself blushing even as I laughed. “Better than how I met Aiden.”

“Well, yeah, that’s not really a story I’d suggest repeating over Thanksgiving.”

“What? You don’t think my grandma would want to hear those gory details after saying grace?”

Haley snorted. “Okay, I know you two aren’t together anymore, but I dare you to tell your grandma that story.”

“Do you?”

“Mmhmm. And I want it on video.”

I just laughed, shaking my head. Nobody, least of all my grandma, needed to hear about how Aiden and I had been at that party in the first place, never mind exactly why Aiden had been sniffing the *way*-too-old-to-be-consumed popper after drinking too much. They definitely didn’t need to hear how his then-boyfriend had bailed, and I’d gotten worried, stayed with him, and taken him to the ER when he couldn’t stop throwing up. No romcom would ever start out like that, and neither my grandmother nor my daughter ever needed to know that “a friend introduced me to Aiden” was a politician-level stretching of the truth.

Humor fading, I said, “So, cute meeting aside…how do I *do* this?” I raked a hand through my hair. “I mean, for all I

know, this is going to be a flash in the pan, but what if it's not?" I gestured in the direction Dallas had gone. "How do I navigate this with her?"

Haley chewed her lip. "Hmm. Wow. That's a tough one."

"Right? Like, I'm always nervous about introducing her to a new partner, but this…" I scratched the back of my neck. "I don't know what to do. And the thing is, I don't want to tell her about him too soon, but I also don't want some gossip site to tell her about us either."

"Hmm. Wow." She folded her arms and quirked her lips. "That…is a dilemma I have never had to think about."

"Right?" I laughed dryly. "I never imagined it either. But here I am."

"You lucky dog." She tilted her head. "So how serious are things between you?"

"Uh, well… Not very. Not yet. I mean, it's a new thing, you know? It's hard to tell."

"Hmm. Well, maybe you two should start by being discreet. If you don't want our daughter to know, then don't give the press or anyone else a chance to find out."

"Good idea."

"As long as you keep it on the downlow, you guys can take your time, figure out what you're doing, and…" She shrugged. "Decide if it's even something she needs to know about, and if it is, then… I mean, she's not in kindergarten anymore. A few more years, she's probably going to start dating too."

I almost choked. "Excuse me, no, she's not dating until she's forty."

Haley laughed, rolling her eyes. "Uh-huh. To be serious, though, she's getting to the age where you're not just bringing someone into her life like I brought in Nick, you're being a role model for dating and relationships. It's *good* for her to see you dating someone, and even breaking up if that happens."

“Okay, I hadn’t thought of that.” I shifted my weight. “Except this isn’t just some guy I”—I made air quotes—“‘met through a mutual friend’ because holy shit I am not telling our daughter if I met someone on Tinder.” I lowered my hands. “This is *Jase Kelly*.”

“I know. So give it some time before you tell her, but even if you are worried about ruining her sports hero for her, that’s better than her wondering why her dad is sneaking around dating someone.”

“Hmm, yeah. You’re right. Am I overthinking this?”

“No.” Haley folded her arms loosely and shook her head. “You’re just trying to be mindful of her feelings.”

“I am. And I’m…” I sighed. “I’m also worried because of how things have gone in the past. When people have left over…”

Grimacing, Haley nodded slowly. “Yeah. That’s always tough.”

“Especially this time, since she idolizes him.”

“Oh. Yeah. Good point.” She blew out a breath. “I mean, I would think the best thing you can do is talk to him about it. Like, if it looks like this relationship has some staying power, sit down and lay it all out for him.”

“You’re probably right. I just…” I sighed. “I guess I’m worried that conversation will go the way it usually does.”

“It might.” She shrugged apologetically. “But then you’ll know, and he’ll know, and you can both move on.”

“Somehow that’s always easier said than done.”

“Of course it is. But so is…” She nodded down the hall.

Shoulders drooping a little, I nodded. Haley and I were completely candid with each other about the stress of trying to help our daughter weather her medical issues, so she didn’t have to add any caveats about how she loved Dallas and would never trade her for the world, or that she knew our little girl’s situation could be a million times worse. I knew it and she knew it, and we could be open and

honest with each other about the hard parts. I was beyond grateful for that.

"You'll find somebody," she said. "If it's not Jase, it'll be someone else."

"Yeah. I just seem to be cursed with finding people who are fine dating a single dad as long as his kid is rarely seen and ideally not heard." I huffed a bitter laugh. "Or *hurt*."

"Ugh, yeah. Half the single parents in the support group I go to with Nick say the same thing—if their children aren't in pristine perfect health, then potential partners are out of there." She paused. "I still think you should join the group. It's been really helpful for us."

"I'll think about it." That was my stock answer, and like she always did, she let it go. I knew the group had been great for her and Nick, but support groups had never really been my thing. "Well, anyway. I'll see how things go with Jase, and if it looks like there's anything actually happening between us, then I'll talk to him and hope for the best."

She shot me a pointed look. "And by talk to him, do you mean coming in hot like you usually do?"

I avoided her gaze. "Hey, I know you don't like how I do it, but sometimes the direct approach is—"

"The fastest way to make someone think you're giving them an ultimatum." She sighed, and her tone and expression both softened. "Just maybe think about what I've said the last few times, you know?"

I gritted my teeth. We'd argued about it more than once—it was one of the few things we could never agree on—and I got where she was coming from. The part she didn't get was that letting things evolve slowly and naturally just gave me more time to invest myself emotionally in someone before they came to the same inevitable conclusion. Maybe I had a habit of jumping the gun by laying it all out on the table and telling partners that dating me meant that Dallas and her migraines were part of their lives now too. Maybe I'd driven a few out the door by, as Haley put it, coming in

hot. But the part I kept circling back to was that they probably weren't going to stick around anyway, so why waste their time or mine?

I didn't have it in me to have this argument with her again, though, so I just said, "I'll see how things go. If it seems like we might get serious, I'll talk to him."

She watched me with a look that said she might argue with me about it, but instead, she went with, "That's about all you can do. And good luck." She smiled. "From what Dallas told me, he's a really nice guy."

"Oh, he is."

She studied me, then laughed. "Have I ever told you how adorable you are when you're getting all ridiculous over someone?"

My face burned and I rolled my eyes. "Yes, you have, and you don't need to repeat it."

"Okay, I won't." She snickered, then came closer and hugged me. "Seriously, good luck with him. I really hope it works out. And don't worry. My lips are zipped."

Despite all my worries, I smiled as I hugged her back. "Thanks. I hope so too."

I left the apartment. Down in the parking lot, I sat in my car with the engine idling for a long moment, thinking about what my daughter's mother had said. She was right that Jase and I should keep whatever this was on the DL and stay off the press's radar. As far as I was concerned, the longer we did that, the better, whether or not Dallas knew. I did not need the press all up in my business, thank you very much.

So Jase and I would be subtle about things. And after a while, I'd see where those things were going. If this was just a casual fling, and we fooled around a bit before going our separate ways—cool. If it turned out to be something more serious, well…

Then I hoped a certain difficult conversation wasn't the end of it.

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CHAPTER 13

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JASE

Nerves. Nerves. Holy shit, nerves.

Leaning against my kitchen cabinets, I drummed my nails on the counter and tried to pull myself together. I was overreacting. When *wasn't* I overreacting? I'd spent the whole damn day—especially while I was sitting in the airport and on the team's jet—dreaming up every imaginable way tonight could go wrong, and now I was basically convinced there was no way anything could possibly go right.

I glanced at the clock on the microwave.

7:25.

Oh fuck.

Devin said he'd be here at 7:30. Assuming he got here on time, I had five minutes to calm myself down. Or work myself up even more. If he was late, then I had more than five minutes, and that would be plenty of time to come up with a few dozen more ways this could—

I closed my eyes and exhaled slowly.

At least I was no longer sweating over the thought of my junk not stacking up to his. Though if I got too nervous and couldn't get it up…

"Goddammit," I muttered into my kitchen as I rubbed my eyes with my thumb and forefinger. Nerves hadn't kept me from getting hard on FaceTime, but I'd also known that

I could bail on a split second's notice. I could "drop the call." My battery could "die." If we were in the same room and he had my underperforming dick in his hand, then there really wasn't any bowing out gracefully and pretending the technical difficulties were phone-related.

And now that I was freaking out about it, I'd keep freaking out about it, and now I probably *wouldn't* be able to get hard, and—

"What the hell is wrong with me?" I whispered. Everyone else could hook up without falling apart. Why couldn't I?

My phone vibrated.

Just parked. On my way up.

Oh God. Oh God. Oh fucking God. I inhaled deeply through my nose, let it out through my mouth, and told myself over and over and over again that there was nothing to be nervous about. I just needed to get a grip.

My doorbell rang, and I took another deep breath before I headed for the door.

I can do this. I can do this like a normal person. I can do *this.*

After one last deep breath, I opened the door.

As soon as I met Devin's eyes, my nerves intensified, but so did my need for him. I stood aside and gestured for him to come in. I sent up a quick little prayer that the night didn't end in disaster as I closed the door behind him, then put on a smile that hopefully didn't betray how freaked out I was. "You, um…want something to drink? I've got coffee, beer…"

Devin swallowed, shaking his head. "No, no, I'm fine. Thanks." He smiled, and—wait, was he nervous too?

"Okay. Well, um." I cleared my throat. "I think I could stand some water." I started toward the kitchen, but a gentle hand on my elbow stopped me.

"Wait," he whispered, and he was suddenly close, so close, and he didn't give me a chance to panic before he

wrapped an arm around my waist and kissed me.

Oh. God. Getting hard was definitely not a problem. Not right now. I was still nervous, but holy hell, I wanted this, and I wanted him. My body was responding without giving a damn what my brain had to say about it.

He broke the kiss and looked in my eyes, his expression a little dazed. “I just needed to do that,” he whispered. “I’ve been thinking about it ever since that night in your car.”

“Yeah?”

He nodded as the tip of his tongue darted across his lips. “What can I say? I really like the way you kiss.”

“Do you?” A little more confident now, I touched his face. “Likewise.” Then I kissed him again, and that soft moan that vibrated against my lips as he melted into my arms was seriously the sexiest thing ever.

When we came up for air, he was breathing as hard as I was, and whispered, “Did you, um, still want that water?”

“What water?” I murmured. He grinned against my lips, wrapping his arms around my neck, and there was no holding back anymore. There was no console between us. No one to bust us. No reason to stop. Even my nerves seemed to be mostly MIA now, and I took full advantage, pressing Devin up against the wall and kissing him hungrily, just the way I’d been imagining it. He responded with a muffled moan and rocked his hips just right to rub our clothed cocks together. Apparently I wasn’t the only one having zero trouble getting hard tonight.

Every time we’d talked or texted, I’d felt a little less like my inexperience would scare him off or turn him off, but now that he was here… Now that I was kissing him and he was grinding against me and there was a bed and condoms and lube down the hall…

Devin broke the kiss and met my eyes. “Nervous?”

I swallowed. “I’m not being subtle about it, am I?”

“It’s okay.” He reached for my hand and laced our fingers together, that gentle contact making me forget how to breathe. “For what it’s worth, there’s no pressure.”

“That’s easy to say.”

“I mean, it though.” He held my gaze. “There’s nothing we have to do. If you’re nervous about something, we don’t have to do it.”

“What if I’m nervous about everything?”

His soft smile made my knees even weaker. “I mean, worst-case scenario, you can sit back and let me blow you.”

I blinked. “That’s… That’s the *worst*-case scenario?”

The smile turned to a grin, and he nodded. “Mmhmm. There really is no pressure.” He drew me closer and kissed me again. “As long as I get to watch you come again,” he purred against my lips, “I’ll be perfectly happy.”

I moaned, sliding my hands into his back pockets and pulling him flush against my hips. “Keep talking like that, you’ll see it sooner than later.”

“Then maybe we should get out of these clothes.” He paused, looking in my eyes. “If you’re, um, if you’re good with that.”

I didn’t even have to think twice. “Oh yeah. I’m good with that. Let’s, um… Let’s go…” Oh, fuck talking. I took his hand and led him down the hall to the master bedroom.

“Ooh.” Devin looked around the room as I closed the door behind us. “Now this is definitely my speed.”

“What’s that?” I put my hands on his waist from behind and kissed the side of his neck. “A bed and a bottle of lube?”

Leaning back against me, he murmured, “Exactly.”

Then he tilted his head back against my shoulder, and his hand slid up into my hair as we kissed, and he pressed his ass against my hard-on. I ran my palms up and down his sides and around to his flat stomach and chest, and holy fuck, I loved the shape of a man’s body. I gathered his shirt in my fingers, tugging it up until I could run my hands over

his smooth, hot skin. Just touching him like this—touching his bare stomach while he leaned into me and we kissed over his shoulder—turned me on like *whoa*.

Devin twisted around in my arms, and suddenly my hands were on his bare back and he was kissing me full-on and oh, fuck, his hard-on was rubbing against mine through our pants.

But then he broke the kiss and stepped back. I had a second or two to be disappointed before I realized he was peeling off his shirt, and—good idea. I did the same, and when we came together again, his hot, bare skin was against mine, his hands were roaming all over my back and my shoulders, and I seriously hadn't realized how sexy it would be to feel both of our hard cocks between us, even with the layers of denim separating them.

"We should really…" He mumbled between kisses. "We should really do something about these clothes."

"Mmhmm. I know." I kissed him again, and neither of us was getting anywhere with the clothes we still had on. Whatever. We did shuffle a few steps closer to the bed, but our pants were still on because we were too busy making out and groping to do anything about them.

Except they were getting a little uncomfortable. I had a feeling my erection would be much happier sliding against his skin than straining against my zipper.

"Damn it, I want to be naked with you," Devin moaned. "Fuck these clothes."

I shivered just imagining the feel of more bare skin against mine. "Y-yeah. Good idea."

He didn't waste any time. He got up and started unbuckling his belt. I followed suit, getting the hell out of my jeans, and briefs. Devin kicked off the rest of his clothes and joined me in bed again, but he paused to give me a long down-up look. "Whoa."

"What?"

Eyes meeting mine, he grinned. “Let’s just say I thought you looked good with your gear on.” Easing himself down beside me, he added, “Get all that shit out of the way, and you’re fucking *hot*.”

He’d seen me naked before, but I didn’t point that out, especially since I’d seen him before too, and I was still staring at him. He’d been hot on the screen. In person? Oh Christ.

“Come here,” he murmured, reaching for me. I pulled him close, and I was out of breath before our lips even met, and once they did, we sank together, wrapped up in each other as we made out and touched.

It had been weeks since I’d kissed Devin in my car, and now—*finally*—we were tangling up in bed together. I was nervous, but we were naked, and all I could think about was how he felt against me and how his kiss made my head spin.

I’d had plenty of sex in my life, but it had never been like *this*. Not even close. I’d always been kind of meh about it, convinced if I just went through the motions, it would be as good as everyone said it was. And sometimes it was fun. It felt good. Orgasms were great.

But oh my God, I had *never* felt like this before.

This was what people meant when they said sex left them gasping and shaking. *This* was what it felt like for a simple touch to send electricity zinging under my skin. *This* was being so turned on my head spun and my toes curled.

Devin’s lips skating along the side of my neck had me gasping and arching like he was deep-throating my cock. We’d barely done anything yet, and I was sure I was one well-timed kiss away from coming. Had I ever been turned on like this before? Not that I could remember. And it didn’t matter—I was this turned on now, and Devin seemed like he fully intended to do something about that.

Devin pushed himself up on his arms and met my gaze. Then he laughed softly and shook his head.

“What?”

“Nothing.” He met my eyes again as he moistened his lips, and he blushed a little as he said, “I just… I still can’t believe you’re here.”

“Tell me about it.” I trailed my palms up his sides. “This is mind-blowing for me. Actually being with a man.”

“Yeah, but I’m still trying to get my head around being with Jase Kelly.”

I laughed. “I’m just a guy who happens to play hockey, man.”

“Oh, no. You’re more than that.” He came down and brushed his lips across mine. “Way more than that.” Before I could answer, he kissed me full-on, and I didn’t bother trying to talk him out of being starstruck. In a way, *I* was a little starstruck—this ridiculously attractive guy had made it past all my awkwardness and stumbling, and he wanted me like this? Holy shit.

Hands slid over skin as we made out in the middle of my bed. Somehow, we shifted around, and his hips settled between my thighs, and wow, that was sexy. Especially when he rocked his hips slightly and rubbed his erection against mine. Just being that close to another man’s hard dick made me dizzy as fuck. I had never even imagined how hot it would be to feel the thick, hard ridge rubbing against me, or how much the brush of stubble or a long, masculine groan would turn me on.

The heat of his naked body pressed to mine made my heart go wild. I’d been fantasizing about this for days, and for the first time in my life, reality beat my fantasies by a mile. What I’d thought were hunger and attraction in the past—I didn’t know what the hell they were because *this* was hunger and attraction. I couldn’t get enough of his kiss, or of exploring his gorgeous body with my hands and mouth. I’d always weirdly imagined a man’s body as hard and solid, but now my palms and fingertips were sliding all

over soft skin while equally soft lips explored my neck and the underside of my jaw.

The only thing hard were the two erections pinned between us as we made out and groped. Sometimes muscles were tense and firm under my fingertips, but it was the soft warmth of his skin that had me craving more.

How did I ever doubt for a second that I am one hundred percent gay?

I was still worried I wouldn't be good, but there was really nothing to be bad at right now. We were just kissing and touching—it was as easy as it was amazing.

And now I was feeling a little bold and wanted to push myself a bit. I slid a hand between us, and we both gasped as I closed my fingers around Devin's hard-on. I stroked him, and it was so surreal to have my hand on someone else's cock.

I'd been worried about how I'd literally measure up to another man. That was partly from my ex, and partly because every guy I'd seen in porn—gay or straight—was hung like a bull. Seeing Devin on the screen, I'd realized we were about the same size. In person, same deal. No reason to be intimidated by size. Awesome.

I tightened my grip, and Devin's hips jerked and his fingers dug into my shoulders.

"Oh God," he breathed between kisses.

"Like that?"

He made a sound that was definitely yes, and he kissed me again, and I stroked him as he rocked his hips and fucked into my hand. Just doing this much—stroking him and making out—I was more turned on than I'd ever been, even in the last few seconds before an orgasm.

Definitely, definitely into dudes. This is amazing.

And nerves could go to hell—I wanted more.

"So, um…" I swallowed. "I've never sucked dick in my life."

"Do you want to?"

I hated that I actually had to think about that, but with as much as I'd questioned the hell out of everything relating to my sexuality, I *did* have to think about it. But only for a second. "Yeah. I do."

Devin's grin made my spine tingle. "Don't let me stop you."

"Just, um…" I laughed self-consciously. "Remember I've never done it."

"I know. When in doubt—do what you know you enjoy. Long as you're not biting me or something, you're good."

I laughed again and brushed a kiss across his lips. Then, pretending I wasn't as nervous as I absolutely was, I moved down so I could try this.

Do what you know you enjoy.

Okay. Well. I definitely knew I liked a lot of attention to the head, and that was a lot less intimidating than figuring out how to take his entire cock in my mouth. So, I steadied him with my fingers around the base, and I cautiously ran my tongue around the head.

"*Ooh*, fuck," Devin moaned. "Do that again."

I did, this time with a little more confidence, and I immediately liked it because of the way he gasped and swore. And I liked doing it too. Having my mouth on a guy's dick was… Fuck, it was *hot*.

And maybe since this was easy, I could try a little more. Still keeping him steady with one hand, I cautiously took him into my mouth. Not far—just enough for the head to meet the roof of my mouth. Maybe I'd try deep-throating another time, but I liked this, and from the way he whispered my name and his fingers twitched between my shoulders, he liked it too. It helped that he wasn't cartoonishly huge—I could tease and explore him without straining or choking.

Sliding my lips and tongue along his hard cock and the thick head turned me on, but nothing in the world was hotter than the sharp gasps and low groans coming from

Devin’s lips. The feel of his dick in my mouth was amazing, but it was the whimpered “oh, fuck, do that again” that made this so sexy I could barely stand it.

So I did it again. And again. I explored every inch of him from the head all the way down to his balls. Even though I didn’t have half a clue what I was doing, the sounds Devin made and the way his whole body trembled and tensed told me I was doing just fine.

“Jase…” He squirmed. “Jase, come up… Come up here.”

I lifted myself up and moved toward him, and he met me halfway, gripping the back of my neck and claiming a hard kiss before we sank together onto the pillows.

“Loved what you were doing,” he panted against my lips. “Just… God, I needed to kiss you again.” And he did kiss me again, holding my hair painfully tight as he moaned against my lips. I thought I was turned on before. Having a man in my arms who was shaking with need? For *me?* That was beyond sexy, and I wanted to do everything. I wanted to be absolutely drunk on him before this was over.

“You said we don’t have to do everything,” I said. “Can we, um, do more?”

“Anything you want,” he said breathlessly. “What do you have in mind?”

“I… Well…” I swallowed. “I really want to fuck.”

Devin shivered, biting his lip. “You ever had anal before?”

I nodded. “On top, though.”

He grinned. “Good. Then you already know how it all works.”

“Go slow and use a lot of lube, right?”

“Bingo. Do you have lube?”

I motioned toward the nightstand.

He was closer, so he reached for it, giving me a gorgeous view of his lean torso, and I couldn’t resist running my hand up his back.

Still grinning, he came back, lube bottle in hand, but then he turned serious. “This is like anything else, you know—we can always stop. If you don’t like it or if it’s too much.”

I nodded. “I know.”

“And anal isn’t, like, mandatory.”

“Really?”

“Not all guys do it. If you want to, I am definitely game, but don’t feel like you have to.”

I pushed myself up and kissed him. “Oh, I want to.”

“Yeah?”

“Uh-huh.”

His grin returned, and he popped the top on the lube bottle. But then he paused again. “You still okay with skipping condoms?”

I swallowed. We’d talked about it while I’d been on the road. He’d had time to get a blood test, which came back negative across the board. Plus he was on PrEP, and anyway, I’d been tested since the last time I’d had sex, which was two years ago. So…we’d agreed that condoms weren’t really necessary. I’d bought them just in case, and maybe that was a good thing because now that we were here…

“Hey.” He squeezed my leg, and when I met his gaze, his expression was completely genuine and serious. “It won’t hurt my feelings if you want to use them.”

My heart was hitting its familiar rapid-fire tempo, and I chewed the inside of my cheek. Was I just freaking out because I’d never been willing to risk going bareback with a girlfriend? Both our tests were clear. Nobody was getting knocked up. There was no reason to use a rubber with Devin. So why couldn’t I—

“Jase.” He touched my face, then sat up and pressed a gentle kiss to mine. “I’ve got a couple in my pocket.” He gestured toward the floor where our clothes had landed. “Let me get one.”

“You brought them? Even after we talked?”

He shrugged. “I wanted a backup in case one of us changed our mind.”

And just…like…that…

My heart started to slow down. There was no pressure. There was no point of no return. I’d said I was fine going bareback, but Devin was perfectly willing to let me change my mind at the very last second.

“Don’t move.” He kissed me again. “I’ll grab them.” He started to lean away, but I caught his arm.

“No.”

“Hmm?” He faced me again.

“Let’s not.” I drew him back in and kissed him softly.

“Are you sure? It really doesn’t make much difference to me. Sensation-wise.”

I nodded. “I know. But…” I swallowed. “I want to.”

He searched my eyes. Then he smiled, slid a hand up into my hair, and kissed me again, and we let it go on for a long, long time just because why the hell not?

Somewhere in the middle of all the kissing, Devin opened the bottle of lube, and he slicked up my cock. That was a whole new level of *oh God, yes*. I used lube all the time when I jerked off, but Devin’s slippery, talented hand was amazing, especially while he was kissing me like this.

Then he broke the kiss, and he put some lube on my hand. “I don’t need a *ton* of prep,” he said, lifting his chin to find my lips again, “but I enjoy it, so take as long as you want.”

“Duly noted,” I murmured just before he claimed my mouth.

Still stroking my cock, he parted his thighs, and I slid my hand down past his cock and between his legs. I teased him a little with a lubed fingertip, then pressed in, and he gave another one of those muffled moans that turned me on like crazy. Again when I added the second finger.

For ages, he stroked me and I fingered him and we made out, and I was only vaguely aware that we were working toward doing anything else. This was hot and sexy in ways I'd never experienced, and I was glad he'd said we could take our time with this part. Turned out I enjoyed it too. I loved the way he moaned and tensed and relaxed, and the way he rocked his hips as if he were trying to fuck himself on my fingers. I loved what he did with his hand, stroking me like he just wanted me to enjoy it, not like he wanted to get me off quite yet. And kissing. Holy fuck, I would never get tired of kissing this man.

Devin shivered hard, clenching around my fingers, and his voice came out as a moan as he said, "I want your dick."

I was seriously surprised I didn't shoot my load all over him right then and there. The thought of fucking him—*finally* fucking him—had me so turned on the whole world was spinning.

I slid my fingers free and he let go of my cock, and then he kissed me, and as he did, he rolled me onto my back. When he broke the kiss, he sat up, straddling my hips. "Stay just like that." He grinned down at me. "Let me do the work while you enjoy the ride."

"Oh, I like the sound of that." I slid my palms up his thighs. "Love the view, too."

He flashed me a grin and paused to put some more lube on me. Then me met my gaze. "Hold yourself steady for me."

I did as I was told, and he rose up off me. I guided him down onto the head, then let him take over again. He came down slowly, and oh fuck, as soon as the head of my cock slid into him, I understood the difference between bareback and not. The heat… the slickness… the unfiltered contact as he eased himself down.

"Oh Jesus," I whispered. "That is so…"

Devin rose up a little, then sank back down on my dick, and as he did, he groaned, "Holy…"

Oh, God, this was… Everything about it was…

“Fuck, Devin,” I murmured, sliding my hands up his thighs again just because I was desperate to touch him.

He moaned as he came down on my cock again, taking me deeper this time. “Ungh, baby.”

I couldn’t resist and lifted my hips to push into him, and before my brain could jump in with *oh fuck should I have done that?*, Devin made a sound that silenced all my worries. He dropped forward onto one arm and rested the other on my shoulder, and he slurred, “Do that… Do that again.”

Do it again? Oh hell yeah.

I pushed up again, and he rolled his hips, and we both whimpered. We fell into a slow, amazing rhythm together, and I arched under him, squeezing my eyes shut because it was all so fucking intense. But I didn’t want to miss the view, so I blinked them open again, and…oh, yeah, that was hot. The hottest thing I’d ever seen—Devin, riding my cock, his lips parted and eyes squeezed shut, deep furrows between his brows and sexy contours forming in his abs every time the muscles contracted with the exertion of his steady movements.

My voice ragged, I whispered, “Oh my God, you’re hot.”

His eyes fluttered open, and when they met mine, he got this ridiculously sexy grin on his lips. He leaned down, and oh, hell yeah—kissing while we moved?

Nothing…in the world…had ever been hotter than this. I had the most gorgeous man, and we were fucking, and we were kissing, and I wanted to come so damn bad, and at the same time, I felt like I already had. It was like I could feel my orgasm building, and I needed that release, but I could also feel that blissed-out satisfaction as if I’d already been there.

And damn, I wanted to *move* more than this. I wanted to *thrust*. I wanted to ride him deep and hard. I *needed* to.

“Let me…” I licked my lips. “Let me get behind you.”

Devin looked down at me, eyes gleaming with lust. “Yeah?”

“Uh-huh.” I slid my hands up his thighs again. “I want to do it *hard*.”

He squeezed his eyes shut and groaned, digging his teeth into his lower lip as a shudder ran through him. “I *love* the sound of that.” He leaned down for a long kiss, then lifted himself off me. I got up, and he shifted onto his hands and knees.

Once I’d positioned myself behind him, I put on some more lube, then eased back into him, and… Oh, fuck, yes. The feeling of sliding into his tight ass was awesome, but the view? Broad shoulders, narrow waist, muscles rippling as he rocked back against me? And the low, masculine sounds he made—groaning from deep in his throat, swearing, murmuring my name…

If I had a single stubborn doubt lingering about my attraction to men, it was gone. I had never wanted anyone like I wanted him, and I had never loved sex as much as I did when it was with him. Every stroke made me want more, and I leaned down to bury my face in his neck as I fucked him as hard as I could.

“Oh Jesus,” he moaned. “God, Jase, don’t stop.”

“Like that?”

“*So* much. Holy fuck, you feel amazing.”

I kissed the side of his neck and thrust hard, consumed by the single-minded need to be as far inside him as he could take me. Sex had felt nice before, but this was beyond anything I’d ever fantasized about. I had no idea if I still had a rhythm, or if I was just frantically fucking him, but it felt amazing and either Devin was really, really enjoying it, or he was damn good at faking all the breathless moans and choked curses.

“That good?” I asked through my teeth.

“It’s so… oh God…” He shuddered under me, his ass tightening around me. “Keep… I’m gonna come.”

Hearing those words was a rush I'd never experienced before, and I rode him for all I was worth as his moans drove me on. The sheer thrill of turning someone on like this made me want to send him even higher, and I kept going as he begged me not to stop.

Then he gasped, and he tensed all over, and the realization that he was coming took me right over the brink with him, and I roared as I thrust as deep as he could take me. My body wasn't even under my control anymore. Once my orgasm took over, my hips had a mind of their own, and I couldn't think of anything except coming apart.

All at once, we relaxed. I rested my forehead against his shoulder, and we both trembled as we caught our breath.

Wow.

So that's *why people love sex so much.*

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CHAPTER 14

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DEVIN

It didn't matter how long I'd been talking to him, or how long we'd been building up to tonight—there was still something wildly surreal about collapsing in bed, sweaty and naked, beside an equally sweaty and naked Jase Kelly.

But here I was, and here he was, and holy fuck, this was my life.

Walking into his condo, I'd had no idea how tonight would go. I'd known Jase had never been intimate with a man before and that—no matter how he'd tried to hide it—he'd been nervous as hell. I'd come here tonight with an open mind. Whatever he wanted, I'd follow his lead. If we just made out a little, if we jerked each other off, or hell, if we just sat on his couch and talked—I was game.

As soon as his walls had started coming down, though—when we'd been kissing in the hallway and hunger had started drowning out his nerves—I'd known we wouldn't stop until we were both wrung out and shaking. And I was still stunned to be lying here next to Jase, naked and trembling and pretty sure I needed a moment or two before I tried to stand up.

"That was awesome," he murmured, sounding dazed as he stared up at the ceiling.

"Uh-huh." I turned on my side and draped my arm over him. "It was."

He grinned, letting his head loll toward me as he ran a hand along my forearm. Then, to my surprise, he laughed and shook his head.

“What?” I asked.

With what seemed like a valiant but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to stifle his amusement, he turned to me. “You said on FaceTime that if we were in the same place, I wouldn’t have to worry about getting cum on anything. Guess you were right.”

I snorted. “Yeah. Yeah, I guess I was. Yours, anyway.”

He chuckled. God, he was so cute like this. Hot and cute at the same time. Be still, my heart.

Still smiling, I said, “You want to grab a shower?”

“Together?” His expression was so adorably hopeful.

“Hell yeah, together.” I sat up. “Come on.”

To my surprise, Jase was a little shy as we got up and moved into the bathroom. Once we were in the shower and had wrapped up in a kiss, he relaxed, but after we got out, he was nervous again. He put his towel around his waist, so I followed suit, and we kept them on until we were back in the bedroom. We took them off and hung them on the bedposts for the moment, then returned to his bed. He pulled a sheet up over us, but he didn’t meet my eyes.

Alarmed, I touched his arm. “Hey. You okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I…” With a soft laugh, he blushed and obviously had to work at meeting my gaze. “I guess I was… When I started realizing I was into men, I was kind of afraid of getting naked with another man. In case I, you know, didn’t quite, uh…”

I arched an eyebrow. “I don’t know if anyone’s mentioned this to you, but you are spectacularly hot.”

Jase laughed shyly. Breaking eye contact, he swallowed, the blush deepening in his cheeks. “Thanks. I, um, I guess I was afraid I wouldn’t…measure up? And when I realized we’re about the same size, it was a huge relief, but I still kind of…” He sighed, sounding flustered and frustrated

with himself. “The only time I’ve ever seen gay guys is in porn. That’s… I mean, that’s really the only time I’ve seen *any* guys, you know? Outside a locker room, I mean.”

“Ooh.” I nodded slowly. “So you were worried every guy was packing something huge?”

Still not looking at me, he nodded.

“Jase.” I smoothed his hair. “There’s a reason those guys are in porn. Most of us are just completely average.”

“Yeah?”

“Mmhmm.” I searched his eyes. “Did your ex feed that insecurity too?”

He laughed bitterly. “Is it that obvious?”

“Jesus. Did she leave you alone about *anything*?”

“Not really. And that was one she only broke out when she was really mad. Especially when she had one foot out of the door.”

“For fuck’s sake.” I tsked. “She’s full of shit, just so you know.”

Jase met my gaze, his forehead creased with skepticism.

Smiling, I slid closer to him and curved my hand behind his neck. “At the risk of making myself sound like a slut, I’ve been with a lot of guys. I’ve been with precisely one who was hung like a porn star. Which, okay, that was kind of fun, but honestly, it’s not as critical as everyone says. In fact, I dated a guy for a while who was definitely on the smaller side, and there wasn’t a damn thing wrong with our sex life. He was seriously self-conscious because everyone acts like having a micropenis makes you less of a man, but it wasn’t an issue for us in bed.”

“Really?”

“Mmhmm. Everyone makes… Well, no pun intended, but everyone makes such a big deal out of it, and it’s just…” I shrugged. “It’s not.”

“Oh.” He visibly relaxed, easing against the pillows. “Huh.”

I kissed him gently. “I think it’s just one of those bullshit things people use to make themselves feel superior and make others feel like they’re lacking somehow. The thing is, two guys being together is no different than a man and a woman or anyone else together—you both bring whatever you have to the table, and make it work so both of you are satisfied. There’s a lot more to that than what someone has in their pants, you know?”

Jase nodded slowly, eyes unfocused. “I feel like I’m light years behind everyone with all this. There are guys on my team who’ve been married since college, and I’m…” He sighed.

“How many of them are queer?”

He looked at me. “Huh?”

“Are any of them gay? Bi?”

“I… None that I know of, no.”

“Yeah, well. Welcome to being queer. I was lucky that I grew up in a place where people were pretty accepting, and I had information available to me while I was figuring myself out.” I tilted my head. “If I had to guess, growing up where you did, especially as an athlete, and *especially* as a hockey player… You experienced some pushback?”

Jase swallowed. “You could say that, yeah.” He stared up at the ceiling for a long time, and then he exhaled. “In fact, yeah, you’re right. I didn’t have a clue, never even thought I might be gay, but I don’t think I *let* myself. I never once thought about it, but we had some pretty loudly homophobic players and coaches on the teams I played on when I was a kid. Small town in Missouri…” He shrugged. “And the thing is, I wanted to play hockey more than anything so I shut off anything that might get me ostracized. Letting myself so much as *consider* if I *might* be gay—no way, because being gay meant I wouldn’t be accepted by the other players. So as far as I was concerned, I was straight, because being gay just wasn’t an

option.” He looked in my eyes. “But you can only keep a lid on something like that for so long, you know?”

“Yeah, I bet.”

“And then there was all the shit my ex said, and…” He waved a hand and sighed. “I end up almost thirty before I finally figure out who I am.”

“But you did figure it out.”

He laughed bitterly. “About fucking time.”

“Do you think you’re bi?” I asked. “Or gay? I know we talked about that, but have you thought more about it?”

Jase seemed to mull over my question for a long moment. I didn’t push—rethinking your own identity was never easy, especially as a person got older.

Finally, he said, “I have thought more about it, and yeah, I’m pretty sure I’m gay.” He paused, then nodded sharply. “Yeah. Yeah, I *am* gay. I dated women before because that was what straight guys did, and I never thought of myself as anything but straight. But being with a woman…” He was quiet again before he turned to me. “Being with you feels a lot more right than being with a woman ever has.”

My heart skipped. “Does it?”

“Oh yeah.” He swallowed. “It’s all terrifying and I have no clue what I’m doing, but yeah, it feels right.” With a humorless laugh, he wiped a hand over his face. “Is it weird that I’m a grown man, and I’m scared to death to tell anyone I’m gay?”

“No, it’s not weird at all. It’s *also* pretty damn normal, actually.”

“Really?”

Nodding, I laced our fingers together. “It is. And we can keep this quiet, you know? If you’re not ready to come out, but you want to do this again, we can keep it on the down-low.” I paused. “In fact, I’d, um… I’d kind of rather we did keep it on the DL.”

His forehead creased. “Why’s that?”

“Because of my kid,” I said softly. “She’s a big fan of yours, and I’d just as soon she didn’t find out about this from a tabloid, you know?”

“*Oh*. Wow. Yeah, I hadn’t thought of that.” Jase shuddered. “I’m not really looking forward to the tabloids picking up on it either, so keeping it quiet is fine by me.” He exhaled. “As it is, they’re going to have a field day when they realize I’m dating a man.”

I studied him, trying to read between the lines of his taut features. “Do you think you’ll come out? I mean, whether it’s to say you’re dating me or not—just in general?”

“I want to. Now that I know who I am…” He paused, and he actually laughed. “God, it’s this huge weight off my shoulders. Like something’s been wrong all these years, and then a piece clicked into place, and…”

I smiled. “Yeah, I bet that’s a big relief.”

“It is.” He held my gaze, but slowly, the smile faded again. “I want to come out, but I need to tell my parents before I come out publicly.”

“How do you think that’ll go?”

His voice was little more than a hollow whisper as he said, “I have no idea. They’ve never tipped their hands either way, so I seriously don’t know.” He searched my eyes. “How did your family take it?”

I shrugged. “They weren’t really surprised, to be honest.”

“They weren’t?”

“Nah. I guess they just sort of…knew.” I laughed, absently sliding my hand up Jase’s sculpted arm. “The only time they were really shocked was when I brought home a girlfriend in college.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. They were like, ‘okay, she’s a nice girl and all, but didn’t you say you were gay?’” I chuckled, shaking my

head. “They didn’t object, they were just confused. Apparently they never got the memo about bisexuality.”

“Oh. But they were cool after that?”

“Totally. And they were thrilled when they found out Haley was pregnant.”

“They… They were?”

I nodded. “Yep. The circumstances weren’t ideal, but they adored Haley, and they were getting a grandkid out of the deal, so they had no complaints.”

“Even though you and Haley weren’t together?”

“My mom would have *preferred* if we were married, but she thought it was more important for me and Haley to be happy and be good parents than for us to get married and be miserable because other people told us to.”

“Wow. Your parents sound pretty progressive.”

“They really are.” I paused. “What about yours?”

“They’re…” Jase’s eyes lost focus for a long moment before he took a deep breath. “They can be progressive on some things and really conservative on others. That’s why I have no idea where they land with this.” He sighed, absently playing with a crease in the sheet. “They’ve literally never said anything about it. Not where I could hear it, anyway.”

“Man, that would be nerve-racking.” I studied him. “Listen, I know this is all completely new for you. Just… There’s no pressure, okay? To come out, to tell your folks… For anything. In fact…”

Jase studied me. “Hmm?”

I took a deep breath and watched my fingers trace the grooves in his biceps. “Whatever it is we’re doing, I don’t want there to be any pressure on you. But I also want to take things slow. For me. If this is it”—I gestured at our naked bodies—“that’s cool. If we decide to… I don’t know, date or whatever? That’s fine, just…” I swallowed. “I’m happy to let this evolve whichever way it wants to, but… slowly.”

“Okay. Sure.” He shrugged. “Slow is good.”

“Perfect. And, um…” I hesitated. “I mean, it’s not just that I don’t want the news telling Dallas about us. The thing is, I have to put her first, and I don’t want to give her the wrong impression about us.”

Jase’s brow pinched. “The wrong impression?”

“Yeah. Like, tell her we’re dating and give her the idea that we’re in for the long haul if we’re not sure what we’re doing yet. If that makes sense.” I sighed. “Ugh, it sounds so much better in my head. The bottom line is that she idolizes you, and I don’t want to take that away from her by turning you from her favorite hockey player into her dad’s ex-boyfriend.”

“Oh.” He laughed quietly. “I hadn’t even thought about that. So, um… How do we play it, then?”

I thought for a moment. “Right now, I say we *don’t* play it. You and me, we do what we’re doing behind closed doors, and we figure out what we want out of this. If we decide down the line that we want to—” I hesitated. “Look, don’t take this as me trying to lay out our future or whatever, or assume there’s more going on here than just sex. Just that, if we *do* decide there’s something going on here besides us hooking up, *then* I’ll broach the subject with Dallas. Whether that’s next week or six months from now. Basically, I’d rather see how things go, let them evolve if they’re going to, and if we think we’re *not* going to go anywhere, then we can walk away peacefully so Dallas can still have you as her favorite hockey player.”

He nodded. “I get it. And I’m good with that. Taking it slow, I mean. Not just for her, but for you and me too.” He blushed and shyly added, “This is all kind of new for me.”

“It is for me too.”

“What? But you’ve done this before.”

I ran my fingers through his damp, tousled hair. “Not with you.”

Jase's smile was so sweet, it made my heart do crazy things. "I'm just me."

"Yeah, but every relationship with every person is different. I don't know how this is going to go any more than you do."

"I guess that's true." He laced our fingers between us. "And, um, for what it's worth… Maybe I'm jumping the gun here, but I don't…" He swallowed.

"Hmm?"

He fixed his attention on our hands, watching his thumb tracing back and forth over mine. "The thing is, I've never… Even when I was dating women, I've never really done the 'just hooking up' thing. It's, um… I don't think that's really for me. This is the first time I've really been into sex at all, so I've never…" He looked at me through his lashes. "It's not really my style, you know?"

Pretending my heart hadn't shifted into overdrive, I nodded. "I'm happy to keep an open mind. See where this goes."

His smile came back to life. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." I lifted my chin and kissed him softly. "Plus as long as it's just the two of us, we can keep doing this bareback."

Jase sucked in a breath and bit his lip, and his voice was a sultry purr as he said, "Okay, sold. Because I love it like that."

"Do you?"

"Mmhmm." He combed his fingers through my hair, then drew me in for a kiss. "Think I might want some more of that tonight."

A shiver pushed me closer to him. "Mmm, me too."

"Yeah?"

"Uh-huh. You've got enough lube, right?"

Jase breathed a soft laugh that managed to convey *what kind of question is that?* just before he claimed another kiss.

As we tangled up again, there was a still-starstruck part of my brain that was completely blown away and overwhelmed by the idea that Jase Kelly and I had just agreed to be exclusive and see where things went between us. That we were making out and getting hard and absolutely going to fuck again before the night was over.

But that little voice was quiet and fading, muffled by how right and perfect this felt. How effortless and natural it was to sink into a tight embrace and a long kiss with him. How utterly right it was to have his broad, powerful body over mine as our dicks hardened between us.

We're doing this. We're really doing this.

Not just fooling around. We're really *doing this.*

It was far, far too soon to know where this thing could go and what kind of feelings could grow between us. This could be a sexual flash in the pan. It could be something that lasted for decades. It could land somewhere in between.

That kind of uncertainty was a little terrifying, but it was exhilarating too. Nothing beat the excitement of a new relationship.

No matter what the future held, I was in Jase's bed tonight.

And right here, right now, everything was perfect.

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CHAPTER 15

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JASE

"Hey. Kelly." Collier smacked my shoulder. "Where *are* you today, man?"

I shook myself and looked around the crowded locker room. How long had I been spacing out here? Long enough I had one skate on and the other still in my hands. "Um." I cleared my throat and focused on pulling on my other skate. "Just didn't get a lot of sleep, I guess."

"Oh yeah?" Collier had a big grin in his voice, and when I glanced up—oh yeah, he was grinning like an idiot. He dropped onto the bench next to me. "You got laid last night, didn't you?" Before I could answer, he called out, "Hey guys, guess who got a piece last night?"

Of course that was met with the usual shit-talk and high fives. I just laughed and flipped Collier off; wasn't like any of them would listen if I tried to deny it. In fact, if I *did* try to deny it, I'd never hear the end of it.

So I just let them talk their shit and smack my shoulders and tell me they hoped I'd "saved something for tonight" as if none of them ever showed up bleary-eyed because they'd had a long night in someone's bed. And I mean, they were right. I had gotten laid last night, and my mind was still fixated on Devin, and I really did need to get my head in the game. The literal game. I could get lost in everything I'd done with Devin when my team wasn't depending on me to

keep the puck away from our net and put it into the other one.

But if someone found out about us…

Except, how could they find out?

Well, maybe if my dumb ass hadn't invited him to join the team after tonight's game…

I cringed at the thought. Before we'd gone our separate ways this morning, Devin had made an offhand comment that he'd be here tonight, so without thinking about it, I'd suggested he meet up with me and the team afterward. They way his eyes had lit up at the idea? No way was I taking it back. And I wanted him to come hang out.

But maybe that wasn't the smartest thing when we were trying to keep this quiet.

Not much I could do about it now, though. I'd just have to play it cool, which was something I was really, really… *not* good at.

I'd have to try, though, so I laced up my skates, taped my stick, and when it was time, joined my team on the ice for warm-ups.

As I always did during the superstitiously strict pre-game rituals, I waved at the fans as I skated by the glass. Toward the end of warm-ups, Maddox and I would try to push some pucks up between the net and the glass so they'd fall down where the kids could catch them, so there was always a huge crowd right at the glass.

As I waved at them, I zeroed in on a particular face in the crowd, and I damn near slammed into Maddox.

I recovered fast, though, and skated after Maddox so we could pass the puck back and forth a few times. Hopefully no one had noticed. Though when I glanced at Devin again —oh yeah. He'd noticed.

It wasn't like I hadn't known he'd be here. And this wasn't the first game where I'd been aware of Devin in the stands. It was definitely the first since I'd found out what it was like to sleep with him, though.

What the hell? I wasn't a teenager who'd just lost my virginity. I'd had plenty of sex in my life.

Just…not sex with a man.

Not sex with Devin.

Not sex that had even *tried* to drive me as wild as everything I'd done with him.

I shook myself and continued with my usual warm-up routine, which mostly consisted of chasing a few pucks around at a relaxed pace before firing them at the goal. But goddamn, my brain was rattled now. Devin was here, and I'd known he'd be here, and now everything we'd done last night felt conspicuous. Like someone was going to suddenly put it on the Jumbotron or point the Kiss Cam at us. It couldn't possibly be rational, but no one had ever accused me of being rational once I started fixating on something and—

"Hey. Kelly." Andersson smacked my shoulder. "You sure you're with us tonight, dude?"

I laughed and gave his arm a playful shove. "Was gonna ask you the same thing."

"Pfft. Because *I'm* the one staring into space."

"Yeah, well, maybe try staring into the net? You might get a puck in it."

"Ooh," Maddox said as he skated up behind us. "Kelly's got jokes, man."

Andersson rolled his eyes. "Fuck you both."

I chuckled, but my heart was racing. How obvious was I?

Maddox skated in closer and lowered his voice so only I could hear him. "You good tonight?"

Oh shit. I *was* obvious.

"Yeah, yeah." I shook myself. "A little distracted, but I'll have it together by the time the puck drops."

"I hope so." He clapped my arm and skated on, throwing over his shoulder, "Come on. Let's get some pucks over the glass for the kids."

I followed him, and we started sending pucks up the glass, trying to get them past the tight lip of the net so they'd fall over the other side for the young fans waiting below. It was harder than it sounded, but we usually managed to get at least a few into kids' hands. And maybe one or two into the hands of adults who either didn't notice or didn't care about the disappointed kids next to them.

Come on, you dicks. Let the kids have them.

We sent over as many as we could before the buzzer went off, then waved to the fans before heading off the ice. I caught Devin's eye again, and we exchanged smiles. It made my heart go wild, but I realized no one else noticed. Like, at all. Maddox didn't say a word, and he had one of those faces that always said what he was thinking (which made his post-game pressers hilarious, especially when reporters asked him stupid questions).

So maybe…no one noticed? Huh.

I joined my team in the locker room, and Coach gave his usual pre-game spiel. Nothing felt out of the ordinary in here. I was a little off-balance, but everything else was the same as it always was. The team's collective intense focus. Coach's pointed comments about hey, how about we maybe try *not* falling apart in the third period this time. Gear shifting and squeaking as guys fidgeted with adrenaline. The sound of Maddox taping his stick, which he always did between warm-ups and the first period for superstitious reasons.

When we headed back out for the National Anthem and the first period, everything was the same, from the order we sat on the bench to the line that went out for the first face-off. Then the puck dropped, and it was all sticks and skates, plus the usual chirping between players as we fought to gain and keep control of the puck.

It was weird how normal everything else felt. Last night had been earth-shaking for me. All that confusion about whether I was gay—gone. For the first time in my life, I'd

been in bed with someone and hadn't once thought *Shouldn't I be more into this?* or *Why is this so easy for everyone but me?* Last night, I'd *been* into it, and it *had* been easy, and so many things had made sense that never had before.

I didn't have a clue if it would've been that mind-blowing with any man who'd eventually come along, or if it was just Devin who could somehow simultaneously rock my world and put it on its axis for the first time. I just knew that last night had been one new experience after another, and this morning had been the first time I'd ever thought, *Can't we just spend the entire day in bed?*

But now I was on familiar ice with my teammates, and everything was normal. Last night was one of those bold dots on a timeline, something where my entire life seemed like it would be defined as being before or after that point, but it had just been a regular Tuesday night for everyone else.

And I was…pretty damn okay with that.

I hadn't realized just how much my split with my ex had made me feel like my entire life was under a microscope. My relationship, my sex life, my breakup, my sexuality—it had suddenly been up for public debate and discussion. I couldn't sneeze in public without someone starting a rumor.

Last night would have given people fodder for months if they'd noticed. But they hadn't. No one knew. No one cared. One of the most amazing and defining nights of my life had happened in complete privacy. The next day, I stepped out into the light, put on my skates, and aside from my teammates ribbing me about getting laid, nothing happened.

I not only knew who I was—for the first time in a long time, I could be that person, and no one else knew or cared except the man who'd woken up in my bed this morning. And who was now sitting in the stands, looking as gorgeous

as ever and not wearing *Jase Kelly Fucked Me* on a T-shirt or some shit.

Grinning to myself, I headed off the ice with the rest of the guys to let the crew shovel off the snow. Maybe I could have a private life after all. Maybe Devin and I really could do this without ending up with a bunch of cameras in our faces. Even if my teammates figured it out, there was an unwritten rule that no one gossiped outside the locker room. We could give each other hell, and there was always a certain amount of gossip floating around between us, but it didn't leave the locker room because no one liked the press getting in our business. I trusted them just like they trusted me.

I wasn't sure what I'd expected after last night. If I'd really thought the whole world would feel different and everyone would know, or if I'd just been wound up and paranoid because that was the way I was. About *everything*.

Play resumed, and my focus held on to hockey instead of worrying about anything happening off-ice. As I skated behind our net after Gagnon had successfully fended off a shot on goal, I glanced up at Devin. We only made eye contact for a split second. No one but us knew that flicker-fast smile was meant for me, or that mine was meant for him.

Even as I continued up the ice, zeroing in on the puck as Maddox deftly kept it away from the player trying to swipe it from him, a small part of my mind stayed back there with Devin. I wasn't distracted, though. In fact, I was *less* distracted now.

No one had a clue that Devin and I were hooking up. Of course no one knew.

But some easily agitated corner of my brain had needed that reassurance, and now it was quiet so the rest of me could focus on hockey.

No one was going to find out unless we wanted them to.

No one was going to tell Dallas.

No one was going to out me to my parents.

As long as we kept it platonic in public and didn't do anything to draw attention to us, then we could keep right on flying under the radar.

If we decided this had some staying power, then we could come out. I'd figure out a way to tell my parents and hope they accepted me. And us.

But at least for tonight, Devin was here as a hockey fan, I was here as a hockey player, and no one in the world needed to know why he'd be joining me and the team after the game.

Yeah, we *could* do this.

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CHAPTER 16

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DEVIN

THE PUCK DROPPED, AND THE SECOND PERIOD STARTED

As everyone around us roared, Eric took advantage of the noise to lean over and say under his breath, “You nailed him, didn’t you?”

“What?” I shot him a glare. “What the hell are you talking about?”

He countered with an exasperated look as he dropped back into his seat. “Really? I was born at night, but it wasn’t last night.”

I rolled my eyes. “Shut up.”

“Am I wrong?”

The color in my face had undoubtedly answered for me, so I just muttered, “No.”

My brother barked a laugh and smacked my arm. “I knew it! Man, I should’ve bet money on that.”

“Bet—what?” I eyed him. “What the fuck?”

“Please.” Lowering his voice again, he muttered, “Don’t act like you two weren’t eye-fucking each other that night we went out with the team.”

“I… I did…” I sputtered, then blew out an exasperated breath. “Just keep your mouth shut about it, okay?”

“Dude. Do you really think I’m going to go around announcing what my brother does in his bedroom?” He wrinkled his nose and shuddered. “*Dude*. No.”

“To be fair, you brought it up.”

“Only because—oof!” He doubled over a little dramatically when I smacked him in the gut. “I’m telling Mom.”

“Go for it.”

We both laughed, and Eric mercifully let the subject drop as we continued watching the game.

And oh, I was definitely fixating on one player in particular tonight. I’d done that a lot anyway, but now Jase was more than just a crush on skates. Now that I’d been in bed with him? Oh Lord. Watching him on the ice was definitely putting my heart through its paces.

I’d been a little worried—a *little*, like way in the back of my mind—that going multiple rounds with Jase last night might hurt his game today. That was kind of ridiculous, though. I mean, he was a professional athlete. There was nothing I could do with him in bed that would hamper his hockey game. Not without killing me first, anyway.

But worrying was what I did, so yeah, I’d wondered. Especially when he’d gotten out of bed this morning and rubbed his hips like maybe he’d spent part of the night moving them in a way they weren’t accustomed to.

If he could still feel last night at all, he sure as hell didn’t let it show now. There were cartoons of him with flames shooting out of his skates, and anyone who’d ever watched him understood exactly why. He was fast. He, Kuznetsov, and Maddox were practically unstoppable as an offensive line because of their speed, precision, and aggression. They were thrilling to watch even when I *didn’t* know one of them in the Biblical sense.

Around the middle of the period, a forward from the other team did…something. I couldn’t actually tell from where I was sitting. All I knew was both he and Jase were skating after the puck, and then the puck had gone to someone else, along with my attention. A second later, someone had slammed into the glass like they often did,

but then shouts of “Fight! Fight! Fight!” had erupted from the crowd. Naturally, I’d looked around in search of the action, and I’d found Jase and the other forward in each other’s faces, visors off as they shouted at each other. The forward shoved Jase. He shoved back. Their gloves were still on, but that probably wasn’t going to last long.

I laughed, shaking my head. I’d always known Jase was scrappy on the ice. He’d been in his share of fights just like any player, and he’d had his nose broken twice because of it.

But this was the first time I’d watched him fight since I’d found out what a soft touch he had when the lights went down. There he was, in the middle of the ice in pads and a sweaty jersey, eyes flashing with fury as he dared the other forward to take a swing at him, and all I could think was how nervous and gentle and hungry and attentive he’d been last night. Not a single other person in this arena knew what that hot-tempered forward sounded like when he was pleading for release.

Watching him now was both amusing because of our shared secret, and fucking hot for the same reason.

I know a way you can blow off that steam, Jase…

I suppressed a shiver.

Right then, the forward yanked off his glove, and Jase lunged at him, pulling off his own glove as he did. Fists flew and the crowd roared, but the cheers quickly shifted to boos when the refs stepped in and broke it up.

Jase and the forward continued shouting at each other even as their teammates helped separate them. Someone said something to Jase, and he shook his head and turned around, skating away from the fight, the refs, and his teammates. Maddox fell in beside him, and they exchanged a few words and nods. Jase was obviously not happy, but he wasn’t quite so volatile now.

A ref joined them, and when he gestured toward the penalty box, Jase scowled, but he nodded. The crowd booed

as he did his skate of shame across the ice, and when I caught a glimpse of his face on the Jumbotron, Jase still looked pissed as he dropped onto the bench in the penalty box to cool his heels for two minutes.

Leaning in and lowering his voice again, my brother asked, “Since when do you like hotheads?”

“He’s only like that on the ice,” I whispered. “He’s a teddy bear the rest of the time.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t sound like your type either.”

I shrugged. “A feisty teddy bear?”

Eric groaned and rolled his eyes.

I snorted. “Once again—you brought it up.”

He muttered something and sat up again, shaking his head.

Elbowing him, I said, “Just watch the damn game.”

As they could often be counted on to do, the Snow Bears fell apart in the third period. Offense had their shit together, but their defense—including the goalie—basically forgot how to play hockey.

Fortunately for them, the Snow Bears went into the third period with a four point lead. Though they seemed to be fighting valiantly to lose, they “only” allowed three more goals. There was very, *very* nearly a buzzer beater, one that practically had every fan in the crowd clutching their chests because *whoa*, that was close, but the puck wedged between the goalie’s elbow and the ice about two hairs from the goal line.

“Jesus.” Eric was out of breath, and he put his hand to his chest as we all stood after the buzzer went off. “Cardiologists must make bank after Snow Bear games.”

“I know, right.” I was out of breath too as I gestured at the colorful ads on the boards surrounding the ice.

“Explains why the medical center sponsors them.”

Eric laughed. “I never thought of that, but yeah, you’re right.”

“I’ll bet they’re working together.”

“Bet they are. Time to start wearing tinfoil hats to games.”

We both chuckled.

The crowd moved at a glacial speed up the steps and out the doors into the jam-packed hallways. We shuffled along, gradually making our way toward the escalators, and then down to the ground level. Outside, it was chilly, but comfortable after being in that crush of bodies.

“Oh my God,” Eric muttered as we broke free from the crowd. “I hate that part.”

“I know, right?” Once we were out of the flow of traffic, I stopped. “Listen, um, I’m gonna grab an Uber home.”

Eric turned to me, and I thought he was about to ask if I was sure. But then he laughed and gave my arm a squeeze. “Have fun. I’ll see you later.”

“See you later.” I started to go, but paused. “Listen, um…”

“Hmm?”

I swallowed. “That thing about me and Kelly… In all seriousness, I really need that to stay between us. Like, don’t breathe a word of it to—”

“Don’t sweat it, man.” He shook his head. “The dude isn’t out, so it goes without saying. My lips are sealed.”

I exhaled, pushing out a thin cloud of breath into the air between us. “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

“It’s all good. Go have fun.”

My brother left, and I headed down the block toward the club where Jase told me the Snow Bears would be hanging out tonight. It wasn’t the same place as last time, but had the same ambiance—a roped off VIP area with rustic décor and comfortably dim lights.

As I approached, a woman with a clipboard stopped me. “I’m sorry, sir, this is a private party.”

“Oh. I know. I’m, uh—”

“He’s fine.” Jase materialized beside me. “He’s with us.”

“Oh. Well then.” The woman smiled and stepped aside. “Enjoy your evening, gentlemen.”

“Thanks,” I said.

As we continued past the rope, Jase smiled. “Good to see you.”

“You too.” It was a good thing I was used to not showing affection toward other men in public, because the need to reach out and touch him was almost irresistible. Almost. “Hell of a game tonight, by the way.”

“Thanks.” His expression turned a little shy. “I, um… I’ve got nothing left tonight for…”

“Dude. I saw you play. It’s all good.”

“You sure?”

“Trust me.” With a playful glare, I added, “And after you and your team put my heart through its paces, I probably shouldn’t be doing anything strenuous anyway.”

That got a laugh out of him that put my heart through a few more paces. Oh God, he was so cute.

As we continued across the room, I scanned the crowd. I immediately recognized a number of players, and it looked like quite a few had brought wives, girlfriends, and friends. There were plenty of guys here who weren’t players, and a few wore jerseys like I did. Okay, good. So I wasn’t conspicuous here. I was just a friend Jase had invited along to party with the team. No one had to know there was anything else going on. Perfect.

We sat at a table near the back with some of the other players. I somehow kept my expression normal and didn’t let it show that I was feeling a touch starstruck again, this time because I was sharing a table with not only Jase, but Sasha Kuznetsov and Zane Maddox. They didn’t make my pulse race like Jase did, but they were… Let’s just say there

was a reason their jerseys sold as fast as Jase's did. Maddox had been the top scorer for his university division two years in a row, and as a professional, with the exception of his rookie season, he'd been in the top ten for goals and assists every season since he'd been signed. As a rookie, he'd been in the top twenty for goals and twelfth for assists. Some commentators literally joked that when Maddox went out on the ice, the puck just gave up and went into the net on its own.

And Kuznetsov? That dude was an Olympic medalist for both Russia *and* Canada, and after he'd been traded to the Snow Bears, he'd made some noise about obtaining American citizenship so he could play for the US team. All three of the men at this table played for the division All-Star team every single year, except for that one time two years ago when Kuznetsov had been out with a concussion.

Starstruck? Me? Oh, fuck yeah, I was starstruck. The fact that I'd slept with one of the men at this table made me seriously wonder if this was just a fever dream or something.

No, really, how *is this my life?*

After we'd ordered a round, I took a sip of beer and looked at the three top tier players sitting around me. "Okay, I gotta ask." I folded my arms on the edge of the table and inclined my head. "That fight during the second period—what the hell was that all about?"

Jase groaned, and he blushed a little, looking a million miles from the fire-breathing dragon he'd been on the ice earlier. "Oh. That? So, this jackass—"

"Fucker deserved it," Kuznetsov grumbled into his beer. "That was a cheap shot."

Nodding, Jase grunted. "Coach was right, though. I shouldn't have let him goad me into a fight because we could've gotten a power play after he threw that punch."

"We don't need a power play against those clowns." Maddox sounded about as thrilled as Kuznetsov. "He

deserved to have his ass kicked."

"A cheap shot?" I glanced at each player. "What did he do? I couldn't see from where I was sitting."

"He checked me into the glass." Jase gestured at his left side. "But he also got in a pretty solid punch." Picking up his drink, he muttered, "Asshole."

Kuznetsov grumbled something I didn't catch, followed by, "If I'd seen it, I'd have laid his ass out."

"Wow," I said. "He just… He checked you *and* punched you?"

Jase nodded. "He mostly caught my pad, but it still hurt, and I knew what he was trying to do. He's done shit like that before. Any time he thinks he can get away with it."

"Don't the refs do anything about it?"

"Nah. They usually don't see it." He flashed me a toothy grin. "Sometimes we have to take care of those things ourselves."

"Pfft." Kuznetsov chuckled. "You say that like you don't enjoy it."

"Well…" Jase almost passed for sheepish. "I mean, I don't like the penalty box part."

Maddox, Kuznetsov, and I all laughed. Jase held a straight face for a second longer, but then he laughed too.

The four of us kept shooting the shit, and before I knew it, a couple of hours had blown by. The guys had all stopped at one beer—Jase had said none of them drank all that heavily during the season—and by around eleven, everyone was glancing at phones and meandering toward the door. I said goodbye to Kuznetsov and Maddox, and I was pretty sure I didn't let on that my inner fanboy was losing his mind right then. I mean, holy crap, I'd just spent an evening chilling over beers with three of the best hockey players in the league right now. And one of them was giving me a ride home. And that was to say nothing about last night.

After we'd said our goodbyes, Jase and I left, continuing our conversation as we headed down the sidewalk toward the stadium where he'd parked his car.

"He *had* that save." I gestured sharply. "If he'd just stayed down, he *had* the damn puck."

"Ugh, I know." Jase rolled his eyes. "Coach has been on him for that for a while. Like dude, if you're down and the red light hasn't gone off, and no one can find the puck, don't fucking move. Because then someone will find the puck, and…" He motioned like he was taking a shot.

"Bet he got an earful tonight."

"Nah. Coach doesn't really say much to us after we fuck up on the ice."

"He doesn't?"

"Oh, no." Jase slid his hands into his jacket pockets. "No, he does something way worse. He has a *look*." He turned to me, a theatrically exasperated expression on his face, and his voice echoed it as he said, "He's not angry. He's just disappointed."

"Oh God." I laughed. "You're right—that's way worse."

"Uh-huh. It's awful. When you're coming in for an intermission or after a game, and you know you've fucked up, you're just like, oh fuck, he's going to give me that look, isn't he? And then he does."

"Bet he gets results."

"Most of the time, yeah. Honestly that's probably why we can usually pull it together if we have a crappy first or second period, but a bad third will screw us."

"Yeah?"

Nodding again, he exhaled. "Sometimes during intermission, he'll just stand there and give us all that look. He doesn't have to say a word." Chuckling, he added, "You better believe we play our balls off after that."

"I can imagine."

A few minutes later, we walked into the familiar private level of the parking garage, and my breath stuttered a little

when I saw Jase's car. I'd ridden in it once before, and I'd never really been a car guy, but it was hard not to appreciate the hell out of the sleek curves and angles of that shiny red Aston Martin. *And the comfortable seats*, my brain supplied as I settled into the luxurious leather passenger seat. Riding around in a car like this with a man like that? Hell. *Yes*.

All too soon, though, Jase was pulling into the garage under my apartment complex.

"I guess this is your stop," he said as he took one of the guest spots.

"Ugh, do I have to get out?" I gave the leather upholstery an appreciative stroke. "Because I don't know if I mentioned this last time, but I love your car."

Jase glanced at me as he set the brake. "Ah, so you're just here for my car. I see how it is."

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, Jase. Because your car has a perfect dick and it's *such* an amazing kisser."

Laughing, he leaned across the console and reached for me. "Get over here."

Didn't have to tell me twice. Still grinning, I met him in the middle, and oh… God… If the game had put my heart through its paces, that had only been a warm-up for what his kiss did to me now. Curving a hand behind his neck, I tilted my head and parted my lips for him, and he took full advantage. It was so funny to think that someone who could be such a hothead out on the ice could turn around and be such a tender, attentive kisser. And an *amazing* kisser. He'd definitely raised the bar, that was for sure.

Lips barely leaving mine, he murmured, "I've been wanting to do that all day. Especially since I saw you up in the stands."

"So you did notice me."

"Are you kidding?" He brushed our lips together. "One look at you and I almost lost my edge."

"Oh. Uh." I grinned. "Sorry?"

“Uh-huh. Sure you are.” He kissed me again.

“Should I, um, avoid coming to games for a while?” I couldn’t stop grinning, even though I really did feel bad for distracting him. “So you can focus?”

“Hell no.” He grinned. “I’ll get used to it.”

“You sure? I don’t want to—”

He kissed me to shut me up, and it definitely worked. I still couldn’t get over how Jase kissed, and I hadn’t even started getting my head around the fact that I was kissing Jase Kelly. I wasn’t about to tell him I was still starstruck—that would just make things weird—but I so was.

And if we kept making out in his car, we were going to wind up staying out here all night.

Drawing back a little, I licked my lips. “I should let you go. I’m sure you need sleep after tonight.”

“Yeah.” He put his hand over my thigh. “You free tomorrow night?”

“I am now.”

Oh God. That smile. “Okay.” He squeezed my thigh. “We’ll work out logistics in the morning. I have to be up early the next day to head to the airport, but I’m pretty sure we can figure something out.”

“Perfect. I’ll see you then.” I took off my seat belt and reached for the door. “Oh, before I forget. That was a cheap shot that guy took at you tonight, but watching you fight was pretty hot.”

Jase laughed, blushing all over again. “What? You don’t get off on that, do you?”

“Not usually, but I made an exception this time.”

He chuckled and shook his head. “Yeah, well. For the record, unless you’re out on the ice with me, don’t expect me to fight someone for your honor or something.”

I snorted. “*What* honor?”

His laughter lit up the night and crinkled the corners of his eyes, and I was almost too caught up in how adorable he was to catch his comment of, “You said it, not me.”

I just shrugged.

Tsking, he drew me in again. “You’re a dork.”

“Through and through.”

We were both grinning when our lips met, but our mouths quickly softened into a long, tender kiss.

After a moment, I whispered, “I really should go.”

“I know. Tomorrow?”

“Definitely.” I stole one more kiss, then drew back, and this time I did open the door. “I’ll see you then.”

“Looking forward to it.”

“Me too.”

Talk about an understatement.

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CHAPTER 17

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JASE

Cold sweat trickled down the back of my neck as I paced in the empty visitors' locker room. I'd been in here for… Hell, I had no idea how long I'd been here. It felt like hours. It also barely felt like five minutes since I'd left the ice in the middle of the morning skate, and my fucking heart would not slow down.

Come on, come on. Get a grip.

I ran a hand through my hair, which was soaked with sweat. I tried to tell myself that was from skating, but I'd only been out on the ice long enough to warm up and do one battle drill. Enough to work up a little bit of a sweat, but not like this. This had nothing to do with hockey. It was all in my fucking head, and I didn't even know what it was about.

Goddammit. This was the fucking worst. Getting into one of these spirals always sucked, but nothing was worse than when I didn't know *why* it was happening. If I didn't know why, I couldn't make it stop. Not that I could usually make it stop anyway, but… *Fuck*.

Breathing as deeply as I could, I went into the shower area, leaned over a sink, and splashed some water on my face and into my hair. It didn't help much, but at least then I couldn't feel the sweat anymore. The drops running down

my neck and back were just water. I wasn't freaking out—my hair was wet.

But I still couldn't calm down. The fact that I was someplace unfamiliar didn't help, but it wasn't what had set me off. Fuck if I knew what had this time.

"Come on," I muttered to myself. "Get it together." Leaning against the sink, I opened and closed my hands, trying to get rid of the tingling in my fingers.

I *wasn't* having a heart attack. But it fucking felt like I was. My chest hurt and my left hand was tingling. That was a heart attack, wasn't it? My right hand tingled too, but still. And I couldn't breathe. I was trying to, I felt like I was taking huge gulps of breath, but I wasn't getting enough air, and—*no, I am not having a heart attack. Right? How would I know? Just because it wasn't the last dozen times doesn't mean it isn't this time, so this time totally could be, and maybe I should call someone. This arena has those defibrillator things, right? Do I need one of those? Does anyone here even know how to use one? Oh fuck, what if I do need one, but no one here can—*

The distinctive clomp-clomp-clomp of someone walking on skates startled me, and then sent fresh panic through me. Fuck. I didn't need someone to catch me like this. I'd fed Coach an excuse about needing to retape my knee, and… Christ, had I been gone long enough that someone had come looking for me? Was the whole team waiting on my ass? How long *had* I been back—

"Kelly?" Kuznetsov stepped into the locker room. "You all right?"

I actually laughed. Both with relief that it was him, and because I was so far from all right it… Okay, it wasn't funny. But somehow laughing at it seemed like a slightly less insane response than whatever the alternative was, and I didn't want to think about that.

The skates came closer. From the locker room into the shower area.

“Hey.” Kuznetsov’s tone was gentle as he asked again, “You all right?”

I wiped a wet, shaking hand over my face. I didn’t even know what was water and what was sweat anymore, and was I all right? No, I was not all right. I just had no idea what was wrong with me, or why, or how to come the hell back down, or—

“Hey. Come on.” Kuznetsov put an arm around my shoulders—awkward when he was in skates and I wasn’t—and he led me back into the locker room. “Sit.”

I didn’t argue. Knees shaking and heart thumping, I sank onto a bench beside the skates I’d removed earlier, pressed my elbows into my knees, and rubbed my temples hard enough to hurt. “I feel like I’m fucking having a heart attack.” Holy shit, my voice was shaking. Like, *really* shaking.

Kuznetsov sat beside me, took my hand, and pressed two cool fingers against the inside of my wrist. Then he patted the same spot and let go. “Your heart’s going a bit fast, but it’s still beating. You’re good.”

I closed my eyes and pushed out a ragged breath. Somewhere in my jittery mind, I knew it wasn’t that simple. But the calm certainty in his voice didn’t hurt anything. The fact that nothing about what he’d felt in my wrist had him even a little bit agitated, never mind calling for help—that gave me something to grab on to. Not something to miraculously flip the switch, but it was a lighthouse in the storm. If I could keep it in sight, then I could weather this thing.

“Look at me, Kelly.” Kuznetsov put a hand on my neck. “Look at me.”

Gritting my teeth because they felt like chattering, I made myself look at my teammate. He was sweaty and scruffy, a few dark strands tumbling in front of his eyes, which were wide with concern.

“Just breathe,” he said. “You’re good, man. Just keep breathing.”

I nodded, and for a long moment, we both just sat there, him breathing slowly and deeply while I synced myself to him. If someone had walked in right then, they’d probably think we looked ridiculous, and some voice in my head kept telling me this was stupid and pointless because…because whatever the fuck I’d been freaking out over.

But it helped.

It helped a lot.

And he’d stepped in before it had gotten really bad. There’d been a few times where even he or Maddox hadn’t been able to bring me back down. Those were awful—when I forgot where I was and thought I was having a heart attack and quite literally dying. I’d weathered a few in hotel rooms, and I’d woken up on the floor, shivering cold and drenched in sweat and wondering what the hell had happened. Once, I’d cracked a tooth. Still wasn’t quite sure how I’d done that, only that it had sucked.

I wasn’t that bad right now. After a while, I started to come back down and feel like myself again. Sweaty and shaky, but less sure the world was going to drop out from under me. My breathing slowed. Eventually, my heart followed suit. I leaned forward and rubbed my neck with both hands. My hair was still wet, and I doubted it was from the water I’d splashed over it a few minutes ago. An hour ago?

“You all right?” Kuznetsov asked.

I thought about it. Really, really thought about it. And yeah, I was… Well, maybe not okay, but on my way back to it.

Mouth dry, I croaked, “I think so.”

“What’s going on?”

Sitting up, I shook my head. “I don’t… I don’t even know.”

“You don’t know?”

“No.” I wiped a hand over my sweaty face. “I don’t know. I was kind of edgy out on the ice. I’ve been kind of edgy all morning, to be honest. Didn’t sleep too great last night, either, and then I came in here, and…” Exhaling, I shook my head again. “I don’t know what’s going on. I just lost it, I guess.”

“Okay. Okay. Just breathe for a minute.” Even through my pads, his hand was a reassuring presence on my shoulder. Breathe? I was breathing? Had I—oh, crap, I’d started getting keyed up all over again.

I took a few breaths, then nodded. “I’m good.”

He watched me tentatively before he took his hand away.

“Thanks,” I said quietly. “I think you got here before I totally lost it.”

“Collier said you left in a hurry. Thought someone should check on you.”

“You thought right. I appreciate it.”

I really shouldn’t have been surprised that either of them had noticed or that one had come looking for me. Kuznetsov had seen me through this more times than I could count. Maddox too. It was kind of an unspoken thing on the team that if I started getting freaked out, my teammates would leave me alone but send Maddox or Kuznetsov to talk me down. I hated having them see me like this, and I’d begged them a million times to keep it to themselves, but I was beyond grateful whenever they were there.

A few times, they’d both floated the idea of me talking to Coach or one of the team docs about it, and even Coach and the docs had gently prodded me with the suggestion too, but I didn’t, and they didn’t force it. Seemed like the general consensus was that I was a high-strung player who could play hockey when it counted. As long as this didn’t interfere with what I was paid to do—and it didn’t, aside from the odd practice—then they could all live with it.

And I didn’t go see anyone because I was afraid they’d put a name on whatever was wrong with me, and it would be something that would make the club rethink renewing my contract. There were weird regulations about what did and didn’t disqualify someone from being able to play, and the thought of finding out that whatever was going on in my head was a disqualifier… Well, ironically, it made me freak the fuck out.

At least here and now, Kuznetsov had talked me down, and though I was jittery and wrung out, I was pretty sure I could get through the rest of today. I might be useless for the morning skate, but by tonight, I’d be ready to play hockey.

I picked up my water bottle from beside my skates and took a deep swallow. Then I pressed it against my forehead and closed my eyes.

We sat in silence for a little while before he said, “Hey, did you ever talk to Richard about doing another game like we did for that kid? For kids who can’t deal with the crowds and noise?”

The subject change was abrupt, but he’d talked me through this enough times that I knew exactly what he was doing—pulling my focus to something else so I could come back to earth. I was beyond grateful he knew me this well.

“I, um…” I sat up, rolling my painfully tight shoulders under my pads. “No, I haven’t. Do you think he’d be down with it?”

Kuznetsov shrugged. “I don’t know. But the girl we played for that night—she can’t be the only one, you know?”

“No, she can’t.” I tilted my head to one side, then the other, to pop my neck. “Do you think anyone would go for it? Making it happen again?”

“Maybe? Has Richard ever said no to anything that’s good PR?”

I laughed uncomfortably. He had a point, but the thought of doing any actual PR made me want to gag, and not just because I was still keyed up. I was fine with doing PR events and shit like that as long as I wasn't the one with the microphone in my hand or the camera in my face. It was tempting to punt this one to Kuznetsov, since he was obviously interested in getting the whole thing off the ground, but my pride already wanted to have a word with me about needing my teammate to talk me down from the rafters. Again. So I just said, "I'll, um… I'll talk to Richard about it."

"Great. Let me know when. I'll come too."

"Will do. Anyway, we should, uh…" I gestured at my skates. "Coach is probably wondering where we are."

"Probably." He didn't move. "You good, though?"

"I'm good." I gave his padded shoulder a firm pat. "Thanks, man."

He nodded sharply. "Don't mention it. And say so if you're not."

"Will do."

He probably knew as well as I did that I was terrible about reaching out, but *I* knew as well as *he* did that he and Maddox would be keeping a close eye on me for the rest of the day.

"Go skate." I nodded in the general direction of the arena. "I'm good."

"You coming?"

I considered it, then shook my head. "I'll be fine tonight, though."

Kuznetsov smiled. "You better be."

Then he continued out to rejoin our team, and I sat alone in the locker room for a long time, just letting myself come back to earth.

I was better. I was a *lot* better. Kuznetsov's timing had been impeccable, and he'd stepped in before I'd completely fallen apart. That wasn't something I liked any of my

teammates seeing. It was miserable enough when it happened in the privacy of a hotel room or my condo.

I was still jittery and queasy now, but I figured that wasn't going anywhere for at least a few hours. Maybe longer. I would probably feel more solid once I was home. We'd actually be home for several days after this. I'd be surrounded by everything familiar. I'd sleep in my own bed. Unless I was sleeping in Devin's bed, anyway.

That thought sent a fresh zing of *oh fuck* through me, though it wasn't enough to send me into another tailspin. It had been almost a week since we'd seen each other outside of FaceTime, and I was looking forward to seeing him the day after tomorrow, but what if I hadn't completely pulled myself back together by then?

Oh, shit.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, held it, and then released it slowly.

If Devin and I kept doing this, then sooner or later, he was going to see me break. There was no telling when, or what would set it off (assuming it didn't just come out of nowhere like it had today), or how bad it would be, but it was inevitable.

If I were smart, I'd lay it all out and tell him. Just give him the whole rundown. And probably show him because just thinking about it made me want to lose it again, so if I were face to face with him and tried to explain this? Oh, yeah, he'd definitely know I wasn't exaggerating. Then there'd be nothing to do except let him decide if he was willing to put up with it.

Was I setting myself up for disappointment if I hoped he would?

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CHAPTER 18

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DEVIN

There were a lot of very new and kind of surreal things in my life these days. Near the top of that list: FaceTiming with Jase Kelly before I tuned in to watch a Snow Bears away game on TV.

It didn't feel like I was chatting with Jase Kelly the hockey player, though. I knew damn well that was who he was, and he was obviously in the locker room, but he was just… Jase. It was so weird to get my head around the fact that this ridiculously talented hockey player I'd idolized and crushed on forever was the same guy who'd woken up, sleep-eyed and unshaven, on the pillow next to mine not too long ago. Or who would, once the team was back in town, be in bed with me again.

But I kept my starstruck fanboying beneath the surface, and just sat back on my couch with a beer so we could chat. Especially since he'd mentioned in a text earlier that there was something he wanted to talk about. Something serious, if I was reading correctly between the lines.

As we made our usual small talk and caught up about our days, I could feel the edginess coming off him in waves. He couldn't quite sit still. He looked at me, but his eyes darted away more often than they usually did. Was he just wound up because he had a game soon? I didn't think he'd

been like this the last time we'd talked right before a game, but maybe I just hadn't noticed.

I studied him. "So, what's on your mind? You said there was something you wanted to talk about."

Immediately, his eyes flicked away and he bit his lip, and my heart sped up. This really was something serious, wasn't it? My brain tried to anticipate what it could be, but I ignored it as best I could. No point in getting worked up about *what if*.

He swallowed hard, then took a deep breath. "Listen, um…" He shifted a little, glancing offscreen again for a second before he met my gaze. He opened his mouth like he was about to speak, but hesitated. Then, speaking quickly, he said, "So one of my teammates and I, we're thinking of talking to the PR department about organizing another event like we did for Dallas."

"Oh." That was what had him practically shaking with nerves? I was dubious, but I ran with it for now. "That would be great if they can do more of that. I know Dallas would be all over it."

"Would she?"

"Are you kidding?" I smiled. "Honestly, she's *still* flying after that game you guys did for her."

"Oh. Wow."

"Her sports hero put together a game just for her to watch *and* let her meet the entire team. She's not going to forget that. Guaranteed. And her mom belongs to some support groups that are probably full of kids who'd probably be interested."

"Yeah?"

"Oh, yeah. I know at least one focuses on kids with migraines, and another deals with sensory issues in general. I have no idea how many of the kids or their parents are into hockey, but from what Haley's told me, I think quite a few would jump at the chance to go to

something like that without all the lights, noise, crowds, smells…”

He was nodding as I spoke. “Okay. So there’d probably be some interest. I’ll definitely talk to Richard, then.”

“Great! Let me know how it goes.” I was thrilled he was getting the ball rolling for something like this, but it couldn’t be what had him so nervous. Proceeding cautiously. I asked, “You sure you’re okay? You seem kind of…on edge, I guess?”

His eyes flicked away again, and he shook his head. It was hard to tell if it was the camera, or if his face had really gained a shade or two of color. “I’m good. I’m always a little twitchy before a game.”

“You are?”

“Yeah.” He laughed, suddenly sounding a bit nervous. “You’d think I would’ve gotten over that during my college years, but…” He shrugged tightly. “Guess not.”

“I guess that *is* a lot of pressure.”

“You’re not wrong.”

I still felt like he wasn’t telling me something. Like he’d worked himself up over something, but he’d lost his nerve and gone with the PR thing instead. I wanted to press and make sure he was really okay, but maybe right before a game wasn’t the best time to be dissecting something like that.

I didn’t get a chance to anyway, because Jase glanced off-camera again and tensed a little. Meeting my gaze again, he said, “Okay, everyone’s coming in to get their gear on. I have to run.”

“Okay.” I grinned despite my worry and my usual disappointment that our conversation was coming to an end. “Will it fuck with your concentration if I say I’ll be watching the game tonight?”

Jase laughed, sounding a little more relaxed and doing all kinds of things to my pulse. “Not at all. And I’ll be back

in town in a couple of days. See you then?" The hope in his eyes made my toes curl.

"You better believe it. See you soon."

We ended the call, and I released a breath. I didn't like how edgy he'd been, or how he'd seemed to shy away from whatever it was he'd wanted to discuss. Maybe it would be better addressed in person, and it was a safe bet that right before a game was the worst possible time. So I'd wait until I saw him again, then feel him out and see what happened.

In the meantime, while I waited for tonight's game to start, I went into the kitchen. My mind was still on our conversation as I cleaned up the dinner dishes from earlier, but it shifted away from what we hadn't talked about to what we had. He was really going to try to put together more events like the one they did for Dallas? Good God, I could think of a ton of kids who'd love to come to things like that. If Haley told her online support groups, they'd probably start blowing up her inbox, and the in-person groups would lose their minds too.

I had a feeling even those who weren't into hockey would still want to come because it would be an event that actually took their limitations into consideration. Dallas had gone to plenty of things like that just because it was something relatively normal she could go to without winding up in agony for the rest of the night. Like when one of the paint-your-own ceramics places had started doing events off-site (away from their shop, which had a lot of strong chemicals and smells) using only acrylic and watercolor paints that had little if any scent and didn't require harsh chemicals. Nick and Dallas had probably gone to half a dozen of those in the last two years. She'd never had any great desire to paint, but it was something fun she could go out and do, and they'd had a ball. We'd all learned a long time ago that when normal outings were that hard to come by, a person could work up some serious

enthusiasm for a sport or an activity that wasn't their usual cup of tea.

And my kid definitely wouldn't need her arm twisted to go to a hockey event that was carefully set up to keep from causing her pain. Especially if that event featured the Snow Bears. *Especially* if it involved Jase Kelly. The hockey player she adored and had no idea I'd been FaceTiming with just a few minutes ago. *That* would be an interesting conversation to have with my kid.

But that could wait, and I could keep this card close to my vest while we enjoyed a hockey game tonight. Once I'd finished cleaning the kitchen, I headed back into the living room, and I sent Dallas a text: *puck drop in 5*.

In under a minute, her bedroom door opened, then closed, and she came into the living room in an oversized Kuznetsov jersey. Tony trotted beside her, and as soon as took her usual spot on the armchair, he jumped into her lap.

As we all settled in to watch the game, I didn't dare say anything about what Jase was planning. Just like when he and I had been planning for that first night, I wasn't about to give her a chance to be disappointed. If this never came to fruition, she'd never know, and therefore she wouldn't be disappointed.

But Jase had already made it happen once. He could do it again, right?

Please make it happen. You will make my kid so *happy if you do.*

On TV, the game started. My heart went wild as I watched Jase darting across the screen between a couple of opposing players. He skidded to a halt, doubled back, got in between another player and the puck, and then sprinted toward the opposite goal.

And sitting here pretending I wasn't watching the man I'd been FaceTiming with earlier? And would be hooking up with again before too long?

That was *mind-blowing*.

I just felt guilty hiding it from Dallas. I had my reasons for not introducing her to anyone I was dating for at least a little while, and I was being especially cautious this time, but that didn't stop me from feeling guilty. I was pretty sure that was most of what parenting was—feeling guilty for something I did, didn't do, said, didn't say…

Just see how it goes, I reminded myself. *Give it time*.

Except what if someone else found out first? What if I told her too soon? What if I waited too long? Damn it, when was the right time?

Well, the right time wasn't right now, that much I was sure about. Pretty sure about. I'd see how things went, and if it looked like Jase and I might keep seeing each other, then I'd have a talk with my daughter.

And as much as the thought of that conversation made me nervous, I hoped it became necessary.

Because I really, really wanted to keep seeing Jase.

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CHAPTER 19

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JASE

By the time I stepped off plane two days later, I felt like myself again. The other day's locker room freak-out felt like it had happened months ago, and I was much closer to an even keel than I'd been. My head was still full of eleventy billion things to worry about—tomorrow night's game, if I'd actually hit Send on the electric bill payment last night, if either car needed to make a visit to its respective dealership for maintenance and if something was about ready to fall off or break because I hadn't taken it in. Had I missed any recall notices? Was I driving a death trap without even realizing it?

That was normal, though. There was always a steady hum of worry in the back of my mind. Sometimes—like today—I could mostly ignore it, which left me in a pretty damn good mood.

In the garage below the condos, I parked my Prius beside the Aston Martin, plugged it in, and started pulling my luggage out of the trunk.

A few spaces over, another car door shut, and I grinned to myself as footsteps started coming toward me. Sometimes that made me irrationally paranoid—realizing someone was walking my way—but tonight, I knew exactly who it was before I even looked.

And when I did look, just as I was slinging my backpack onto my shoulders, Devin's smile made my knees go weak.

"Hey you." He gestured at my luggage. "You want me to carry something?"

"Ooh, porter service? Do I have to tip for that?"

Devin rolled his eyes and picked up my small duffel bag. "Shut up."

Chuckling, I shut the trunk lid, gathered everything else, and headed for the elevators. We exchanged a few glances, both of us grinning, and goddamn, I couldn't wait to touch him. Not out here where there were security cameras, and definitely not in the elevators. As much as I'd fantasized about pushing him up against one of those mirrors and making out with him or even blowing him, there were cameras in the elevator too. I didn't need to give the security guys something to gossip about. Or give the lady in charge of the HOA a heart attack.

But as soon as we were upstairs and safely in my condo, I put my bags down, hooked a finger in Devin's belt, curved a hand behind his neck and kissed him, and…

Holy fuck.

It was still mind-blowing that I'd ever questioned—or hadn't known at all—that I was attracted to men. The way Devin's body felt against mine, the low, masculine sounds he made while we stood there in the hall and kissed—oh, yeah. Hundred percent gay over here. And a hundred and ten percent into this man in particular.

After a long, *long* kiss, Devin grinned up at me, and he was a little out of breath as he said, "Hello to you too."

"What can I say?" I smoothed his hair. "I missed you."

"Uh-huh. I got that impression." He kissed me again, lightly this time. When he met my eyes, his face was a bit more serious. "By the way, was there something you wanted to talk about? Seemed like you had something on your mind the other night."

I considered it, but I really didn't want to ruin this. I felt amazing tonight, and I wanted to enjoy it. Maybe that made me a coward. Or a train wreck. Or someone with something he was terrified to lose.

Whatever it was, I shook my head. "Nah. It's all good. I was just overthinking some things, I guess."

He didn't seem convinced. "You sure?"

"Yeah. It's fine." I smiled, hoping he couldn't feel the way my heart had sped up. When I was on an even keel, the last thing I wanted to think about was *not* being on an even keel.

I thought he'd push, but he finally shrugged and wrapped his arms around my neck. "Well, if there is something, just say the word."

Pulling him close, I murmured, "Will do."

I honestly didn't know if I was lying. Being with him was just so, so good. Everything felt so right. I needed to tell him about everything that went on in my head, but I wasn't ready for that yet. I wanted him to see me like this a few more times before he knew what happened when my own head got the best of me.

Just give me a little more time to figure out how to tell you.

First let me show you that I'm worth it.

~

IT WAS A FEW DAYS BEFORE I HAD A CHANCE TO BROACH THE subject of low stimulation events with the front office. Kuznetsov was nearly always scheduled within an inch of his life when the team was in town, so I was on my own for this. Nervous? Me? Not at all.

At the open door of Richard's office, I paused for a deep breath. His back was to me as he rifled through a file cabinet.

Clearing my throat, I tapped a knuckle on the door frame. “Hey, Richard?”

The PR guy spun around, a pen in his mouth. “Hmm?”

“Do you have a minute for me to run something by you?”

He checked his watch, and my heart sank. He was always in a hurry, so—

“I’ve got about five minutes.” He tucked a couple of folders and a tablet under his arm and started for the door. “Walk with me. What’s on your mind?”

With a little surge of panic, I followed him out of the office. As we headed down the hall, Richard walking so fast even I struggled to keep up with him, I said, “You remember that thing we did for the girl who couldn’t come to games because of her migraines?”

Richard nodded. “Mmhmm.”

“So, I was talking to her dad…” Heat rushed into my cheeks, as if he’d suddenly know everything about when, where, and why I’d been talking to Devin, but then I cleared my throat and continued. “There are probably a lot of other kids out there with similar issues who’d really like to come to games. Adults too.”

“So, more of the low light, low noise, et cetera?”

“Yes. Exactly.”

“Hmm.”

“I mean, wouldn’t that be great? Having more events so fans who can’t come to games can at least see some hockey?”

He pursed his lips. “The club might have some concerns about the costs.” Richard glanced at his watch again, and we stopped in front of the elevator. Jabbing the up button, he turned to me. “Events are costly, but they’re not as bad when the concessions aren’t running and only the stadium lights are on. But there’s still employees, ice surfacing…” He blew out a breath but smiled. “As long as the facts and figures aren’t too daunting, I think it it’s a great idea.” He

clapped my arm. “In fact, you’d be a great spokesman for it.”

My heart dropped into my stomach at the same time my pulse spiked. “The spokes—oh, no. No, no, no. That’s not me.”

“Hey, this is your baby.” He grinned. “Who better to be the face of it all?”

“I, um… Look, put me on all the posters and promotional material you want, but the *spokesman* gig?” Grimacing, I shook my head.

Richard frowned. “Look, I feel you, okay? And putting it together one time without needing to do any promo? Easy. But what you’re asking for—kid, I’m already scheduled to hell and back.” The elevator opened, and as he stepped inside, he added, “I can promote this and market it, but I do not have the time to stand in front of cameras or meetings.”

The thought of standing in front of even one camera made me want to gag. “Um…”

“What?”

“A spokesman? Me?”

He eyed me, then shrugged. “It’s your call, Kelly. I’m happy to get the ball rolling on this, but I only have so much time. Find me a spokesman, and then we’ll talk.”

The doors closed before I could respond, and I stood there, lips apart and eyes wide.

A spokesman. Fuck.

Kuznetsov didn’t have time. I didn’t have the stomach. But if I wanted this thing to happen…

Son of a bitch.

~

Devin came by that night, and like we usually did when we got together, we wound up naked in bed before long. By the

time we came up for air, we were both drenched in sweat, and I felt amazing. Always did when Devin got his hands on me. My days of wondering why people were so into sex were a distant memory—I *loved* sex now.

"I should take you along on road trips," I said as we lounged in my rumpled bed. "You'd make the nights between games *so* much more relaxing."

Devin laughed, cuddling up next to me and resting his head on my chest. "I'm pretty sure I'd get fired for that."

"Hmm." I nuzzled his hair. "I could pay you."

"Isn't that prostitution?"

"Oh. Fuck. Yeah, I guess it is."

We looked at each other and burst out laughing. Our conversations took ridiculous turns like that sometimes, and I loved it. I loved being this at ease with someone. In fact, it really would have been great to take him along on road trips if that were possible. God knew he'd probably keep me saner than I kept myself.

Or he'll get to see what happens when I fall apart.

Hmm, yeah. Scratch that. I'll just see him when I'm home.

I pressed a kiss to his temple. "So, hey, I talked to the head of the team's PR department about doing something for kids like Dallas. More exhibition games. Stuff like that."

Devin pushed himself up and looked at me with wide eyes. "Oh yeah? What did they say?"

"The director is onboard. The problem…" I chewed my lip.

His face fell. "What?"

"He wants me to be the spokesman."

Devin blinked. "That's… That's good, isn't it?" He cocked his head. "Why isn't it good?"

I swallowed. "Man, I can't be a spokesman for something. Have you noticed they never have me get up in front of people? There's a reason for that."

"But you did when Dallas and I came that first night."

“Yeah, but there were *two* of you. And I still almost puked beforehand.”

“You did?”

Avoiding his gaze as heat rushed into my face, I nodded. “If there had been even two or three more people there that night, I guarantee I’d have had someone else do the intro. I just… I *wanted* to do it for her since I know she’s a fan, but…” I shook my head and laughed nervously. “My mom says it’s stage fright or something. I can play hockey in front of thousands of people, but make me speak in front of ten, and… No. Just, no.”

It wasn’t that simple. Not even close. Getting up in front of people was one of a million things that could turn me into a shaking wreck, but that was not a card I was ready to show Devin. I didn’t want to lie to him, but I was nowhere near ready for him to know exactly what kind of basket case I really was.

Devin watched me. He saw right through me. He had to. “What if I did it?”

“Hmm?”

“What if I was the spokesman for it?”

“You’d…” I blinked. “You’d want to do that?”

“Are you kidding?” His face lit up with a grin. “Help out with something so kids like Dallas can actually come to hockey games? Dude, sign me up.”

“Really?”

“Of course!” He leaned in for a quick kiss. “And I mean, even if they don’t want me as a spokesman, if your team is onboard, and there’s anything I can do to help, say the word. I’m sure there are a lot of other parents out there in my situation.” He touched my face, and his smile made me weak. “Kind of feels like an opportunity to pay it forward, you know?”

Holding his gaze, I ran my palm along his forearm. “Okay. Well. Maybe we should talk to Richard. Together.”

“Definitely,” I said. “Let me know when, and I’ll be there.”

I smiled up at him, but it faltered. “We’ll see what happens.” I sighed. “He might still want a player to be the spokesman. Because… You know…” I gestured at myself.

“Name recognition.”

“Exactly. But honestly, I think as long as someone’s willing to spearhead it and get the work done without putting more on his plate, he’ll probably go for it.”

Devin nodded. “I can imagine. Do you, um, have any idea what it would entail?”

“No, but Richard could fill you in. And if it’s more than you have time for, or—”

He silenced me with a soft kiss. “I’ll *make* it work. For something like this, I will definitely make it work.” He caressed my face. “Thank you so much for doing this. Not just the night you and the team did everything for Dallas, but taking it a step further for other kids.” His smile made me warm all over. “I think it’s going to make their day.”

“Then we’ll definitely make it happen.” I ran my fingers through his hair. “I’ll talk to the people in charge, and we’ll do this.”

Devin smiled as he moved in for another kiss. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

“Because I want you and your daughter to be happy?”

Devin didn’t answer. He just came down to me again, and we sank into another long embrace and languid kiss.

Holding him close, I was almost overwhelmed with relief that he was willing to step in as spokesman. I didn’t know if Richard would go for it, but even still, just the fact that Devin was willing to fill that role meant a lot. It gave me more confidence that we could make this happen instead of letting it fizzle out because of my stupid brain.

And as I held him like this, I could actually believe that if Richard told us the spokesman gig was non-negotiable, I could step up and do it.

Whatever it takes to make you this happy, Devin.
No matter how much it scares me.

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CHAPTER 20

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DEVIN

On a Sunday afternoon, a few hours before I needed to go pick up Dallas from her mom's, Jase and I had a meeting with Richard down at the stadium. Jase met me in the parking garage, and we headed inside.

On the stadium's lower level, he swiped a keycard beside a Restricted Area door, then held open the door for me.

"Wow." I laughed as I stepped into a fluorescent lit and windowless hallway, my voice and footsteps echoing off the drab gray concrete walls. "Feels like we're going into some secret squirrel nuclear bunker."

He chuckled, resting his hand on the small of my back as we walked. "Nah. They don't let us bring guests down there."

"Not even season ticket holders?" I huffed with mock indignance. "I knew season tickets were a scam."

Jase just laughed.

After God knew how many turns, he stopped in front of a door marked *Richard Sullivan, Public Relations Director*.

My heart sped up with sudden nerves.

Here we go. No pressure or anything.

As we stepped into the office, Jase said, "Richard, you remember Devin, right? Dallas's dad?"

Richard stood and extended his hand over his paper-cluttered desk. “Of course. It’s great to see you again.”

“You too.” I shook his hand. “And, um, thanks for taking the time to talk to me about this.”

“Don’t mention it.” Richard sat down and gestured for us to do the same. “Jase gave me the rundown of what you and he have in mind, and he’s been very vocal about it.” With a big grin, he added, “It sounds like a great thing to do for some of the fans who have to miss games. That’s an entire market we haven’t been able to reach before.”

It grated on me a little that this was a marketing ploy for him. That he saw this as a way of catering to fans who otherwise weren’t buying tickets, and to ultimately add some sparkle to the Snow Bears’ public image and to their bank accounts. But I also understood that money made the world go around, and if bottom lines and dollar signs motivated him to do this, then I could work with it. To a point.

“Before we get too deep into this,” I said, “I feel like ticket prices are a thing we should discuss upfront.”

Richard’s eyebrows rose.

I cleared my throat. “The thing is, a lot of the families who would be interested in these things are under serious financial strain already. I’m going to be in debt until I’m dead, and I can name at least half a dozen families off the top of my head who’ve had to file for bankruptcy as a direct result of costs associated with their child’s healthcare. I realize there’s going to be some cost involved in making something like this happen, but maybe we should go into this thinking of ways to offset those costs right from the start.”

Richard looked dubious, and preemptive disappointment set in. I’d shot this down before it ever got off the ground, hadn’t I?

But Jase spoke up first. “There’s always fundraisers. We can charge a modest rate for tickets, and do fundraisers to

help anyone who needs it. I remember last season, there were some firefighters killed in Boston, and the team did kind of a spin on the Pass the Boot thing that firefighters do. They did Pass the Skate at one of their games to raise some money for the families, and they brought in a ton of cash that way. We don't necessarily need to do that, but game night fundraisers can get a lot of donations. Plus I'm sure we could get some sponsors, and players might be willing to donate their time for the games themselves."

Richard nodded slowly. "That's true. Well, we'll need to figure out how much this is going to cost. Even if players are willing to donate their time, we still need ice resurfacers, stadium employees—that kind of thing. I can't ask those folks to work for free."

"No, of course not," I said. "But I think Jase is on to something with game night fundraisers. Even if it's just… I don't know, a booth where they play some kind of game and get prizes—people love things like that."

Richard looked at me, and he smiled. "You sound like you're in the wrong line of work, Mr. McKenzie. You should be working here."

I laughed. "Yeah, probably. But I'm happy to volunteer." I glanced at Jase. "And if you need a spokesman, I'm happy to do that too."

"Perfect," Richard said, and I swore I felt Jase relax beside me. It took all the restraint I had not to reach over and squeeze his hand. Oblivious to us, Richard went on, absently thumbing his chin. "And you know, after Jase and I talked last time, I remembered that some of the teams around the league *have* had the occasional low stimulation nights. No flashing lights or loud music, things like that."

I nodded. "Those are great, but I'm thinking something for kids who can't even handle that much. Like those who have issues with crowds, strong smells from the concessions—that kind of thing. That's why I can't bring my daughter to a game. Even without the flashing lights or

loud noise, there's still the noise of the crowd, plus the smells. All the caution about lights and noise goes right out the window when she catches a whiff of some cologne or something."

"Really?" Richard asked.

"Yep. Her classmates can't bring anything to school that has *any* kind of smell, and even their lunches can be an issue."

"Wow. That must be a nightmare."

"It's, um… It's not easy, let's put it that way. And some kids can't cope with crowds for other reasons."

Brow furrowed, he nodded. "Hmm. I hadn't thought about that. So the exhibition nights might be the way to go, just with limited tickets and whatnot so they don't get too crowded."

"Exactly," I said. "I mean, you could easily bring in a couple hundred kids and their families and spread them out on the 100-level without anyone getting crowded."

Nodding again, Richard said, "And we wouldn't need as many stadium employees for those events. Not as many as we would with even a quarter capacity crowd, especially if we're not running concessions."

"There have to be some concessions we could do, though." Jase leaned his elbow on the armrest and cocked his head. "Even if it's just things like water and sodas, or if there are snacks they can have that won't mess with other kids." He turned to me. "Are there any that you can think of?"

I shrugged. "We'd have to go down a list, and also see what people's needs are as we get more interest. Pizza, popcorn, and hot dogs are definitely out, since you can smell those across the arena. But things like M&Ms or ice cream… those won't mess with kids who are sensitive to smells, but they can be triggery for others to eat, so we'd need to figure out a lot of different options to make sure everyone's covered." I waved my hand. "I'm sure we can

figure it out. It's a tricky line to walk, even for people who aren't prone to sensory issues." I hesitated, then cautiously added, "I mean, I have to bring an EpiPen to games because you all sell peanuts."

Richard blinked.

Jase sat up. "You do?"

"Mmhmm. Fortunately, my brother can smell peanuts at a hundred paces, but if someone's eating something with peanut butter in it…" I grimaced. "It can be a rough night."

"Whoa," Richard said. "You're that sensitive?"

"Yep."

Richard glanced at Jase before looking at me again. "Huh. Well now I'm wondering if we need to talk to the stadium about peanut-free zones during regular games."

"It's kind of like Whack-A-Mole, though. You accommodate people with peanut allergies, and then someone comes in with a serious allergy to perfume or something else. Or you sit in a peanut-free zone, and then end up in line for the men's room behind someone who just ate a bag of peanuts."

He whistled. "That sounds exhausting, trying to avoid things like that."

"It is," I acknowledged. "So you can imagine how much tougher it is when you've got a kid who loves hockey, but can't cope with strobes and loud noises, never mind the concession smells."

Richard leaned back in his chair and drummed his fingers on the desk. "I'm kind of amazed I didn't realize before now that anyone had to work that hard just to get through the day. Avoiding all the things that aren't a big deal to the rest of us."

"There are a lot of us, believe me," I said quietly. "Which is why I'm completely game to do whatever you need to get these lower stimulation events off the ground. I'm here because Jase said you needed a spokesman, but honestly, anything I can do—say the word."

The PR director nodded slowly, eyes losing focus for a moment as if he were digesting everything we'd discussed. Then he sat up and looked right at me. "Listen, I need to make some calls and talk to the rest of the front office about utilizing the team and facilities on a semi-regular basis. Once I have a better idea of what we have to work with, I'll be in touch so we can start ironing out some plans." Richard pushed a notepad and pen across the desk. "Why don't you jot down all your contact information for me?"

I took the pad and pen, and while I wrote down the information he'd asked for, all I could think was that the night Dallas and I had met Jase had been beyond my wildest dreams. Doing it regularly for other kids who couldn't come to games? Talking to people who actually had the clout and the enthusiasm to make it happen? Holy crap, this was amazing.

Is this real? Is this actually happening?

I glanced at Jase, and he flashed me a smile that said that yes, this was real. Yes, this was actually happening.

And right then, I didn't know if I wanted to laugh, or cry, or maybe both.

I just knew I couldn't wait to tell my daughter about this.

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CHAPTER 21

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JASE

As we walked out of the meeting, Devin was smiling as big as he had the night I'd met him and Dallas. I'd barely closed Richard's door behind us before Devin turned to me and said in a loud whisper, "Holy crap! This is going to be *amazing*!"

I smiled as we started down the hall. "Yeah, it is. And if there's anything I can do to help, just let me know."

"Help? Are you kidding?" He was practically bouncing, his huge smile making my heart go all fluttery. "You already did a ton just by getting this whole thing going."

"Still. I'm happy to do whatever I can."

"Thank you. Thank you *so much*." He exhaled, still grinning. "I can't wait to tell Dallas. She's going to lose her *mind*."

"I bet." I paused. "Speaking of, when do you need to go pick her up?"

He checked his phone. "I've still got time." His forehead creased. "You have time to grab a drink or something?"

"Of course. In fact, the players club upstairs is open. At least that'll keep us out of the public eye."

"Sounds good to me. Lead the way."

I steered us toward the elevators. All the way up to the private dining room where players and execs usually ate, he looked like a kid on Christmas.

“I can’t believe they’re going to do this!” He shook his head. “I mean, I still can’t believe the team did it for Dallas in the first place, but this…” He exhaled. “This is *amazing*.”

“It is. I’m thrilled Richard went for it.”

“Me too.”

When we got to the dining room, we decided we were a little hungry too. Since the place was mostly empty except for us, we got some food along with our drinks. After we’d made a buffet pass, we sat at a table by a window overlooking the vacant arena.

“I can see why you guys like eating here.” Devin set down his plate, which had a few vegetables and dip along with some spicy glazed chicken. “This is definitely not the kind of buffet I’m used to.”

I laughed as I put my own plate down and we took our seats. “I still remember when my brother got signed a couple of seasons before I did. He was raving about all the food. At the arenas, on the planes, after practice—they, uh, do not let us go hungry.”

“You don’t say.” He picked up his knife and fork, but he stopped before he’d even started cutting the chicken. “I’m…” He exhaled, putting the utensils back down, and he smiled. “God, I’m still just so excited about this whole thing.”

“Good, I’m glad.”

“You have no idea. I am *ridiculously* excited.”

I smiled back. “I’m sure Richard loves the enthusiasm.” I cut off a piece of my steak. “So, you have any ideas for these events?”

“Well…” He took a bite of chicken and chewed thoughtfully for a moment. “Everything you did for Dallas that first night, we can definitely use that as a base. It was perfect for her. But other kids—and adults, too—I need to find out what kinds of accommodations they need. If we’re just doing it for a few people at a time, it shouldn’t be too big of a thing, right? To adapt to people’s needs?”

“I wouldn’t think so,” I said. “What kinds of things do you have in mind?”

“Well, I mean, most of Dallas’s triggers are lights or strong smells. And I know other kids have problems with sounds and crowds.” He drummed his fingers beside his plate. “Just getting through the crowd to get to the stands is a big issue for some people. Either because of the crush of people, or because you never know who’s wearing a strong cologne or even some kind of scented deodorant. So just creating an environment where they don’t have to deal with crowds?” He whistled. “Man, that could make a *huge* difference for some fans.” He frowned. “Do you think we’ll be able to mitigate the costs somehow? With fundraisers and whatnot?”

“Totally, yeah.” I nodded. “My teammates were completely onboard the night we did it for Dallas, and a few have asked about it since then. I’m sure they’d be willing to help out any way they can. Financially and by donating some of their time.”

His eyes lit up again, and my heart went wild. I had never seen Devin so excited before, and it was… God, it was ridiculously sweet.

How do I make you smile like that all the time?

To my surprise, he reached across the table and put his hand on my forearm. “I mean, it Jase. Thank you.” He squeezed my arm and looked right in my eyes. “Seriously.”

I put my hand over his. “You’re welcome. And I hope Dallas comes to the games.”

His eyes lit up even more. “Are you kidding? Wild horses won’t be able to drag her away.” He withdrew his hand and sat back, and he looked downright dreamy. “Man, I can’t wait to get going on this. I swear, I will be useless at work tomorrow.”

“Oh yeah? Why’s that?”

Devin laughed. “Because I’ll be thinking about all this instead of all that crap they pay me to do. I’ll be lucky if I

can sleep tonight with my brain going…" He gestured beside his head. "Richard will probably get tired of me, with all these ideas."

"Nah, I doubt it. In fact maybe he's right—maybe you're in the wrong line of work."

Devin laughed again, but it sounded bitter this time. As he picked up his fork again, he said, "Oh, I hate my job, and I'd give it up in a heartbeat if I could."

I studied him for a moment. "Out of curiosity, why don't you?"

Sighing, he dropped his gaze to his food as he cut off another piece of chicken. "Mostly it's the issue of time off. I've been with the company long enough that I have some leeway to ask to leave early, work from home, take days off at the last minute to be with Dallas." He looked at me through his lashes. "My higher ups hate it, and they give me as much hell as they're legally allowed to, especially during my reviews. I'm pretty sure the only reason they don't fire me is because even with all the time I take off, I keep the department running smoothly. If we ever get dinged on an audit?" He grimaced. "That'll be all the excuse they need to fire me."

"Shit. Really?"

Devin nodded. "I've been on thin ice with them ever since we realized Dallas's migraines were a chronic issue. And the thing is, if I start anywhere else, I'm starting at the bottom. No seniority. Probably no paid time off at all during the probationary period. And if I take any time off, paid or otherwise, during that probationary period?" He drew his finger across his throat. "I'll be out the door without qualifying for unemployment. Or at least not much of it, since I'll only have been there a couple of months rather than thirteen years. I can't afford to take that risk, not while I'm up to my eyeballs in medical debt. Plus I can't afford to lose my health insurance." His shoulders sank as he sighed. "I hate my job and the company I work for. But

unless someone comes along and dangles an offer in front of my face that's worth the risk of leaving? I'm stuck."

"Jesus," I said. "I had no idea it was that hard to change jobs."

"It is. It's…" He hesitated, then shook his head, and when he met my eyes again, he smiled. "My job is what it is, but getting to be involved with this thing for kids like Dallas? I'm seriously excited about that."

"Me too. I can't wait to see what happens with it."

Our eyes locked, and we both smiled. As we kept eating, we batted around some ideas for events and fundraisers. He made notes of a few of them in his phone, which was good, because I didn't think I'd remember any of them. I was just too caught up in how happy he was. The way his blue eyes sparkled when he was excited—that was something that would keep me company on those nights on the road even more than all the hot and sweaty memories that usually had me smiling into my pillow. Devin could barely sit still through lunch, and I loved every second of watching his delight at the possibilities this new program was creating.

Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?

All too soon, our late lunch was over and Devin needed to go pick up Dallas. I was disappointed to see our afternoon end, but still flying high from watching *him* flying high, so I had no complaints.

We headed toward the elevator, but we both paused before either of us pushed the button.

"Listen, um…" I met his gaze. "I'd walk out there with you, but…"

Devin smiled. "It's okay. At least in here, nobody will see us."

"No, they won't." I lifted his chin and pressed my lips to his. Just like it did every time, my pulse shot up as soon as we touched, and my spine tingled as he combed his fingers through my hair. "I should let you go. But I'll see you soon."

“Yeah, you will. Don’t get hurt on the road, okay?” He winked. “I need that body in working order when you get back.”

Shivering, I laughed. “You know, I always try to avoid getting hurt, but you’re definitely motivating me to come home in one piece.”

“Good.” He chuckled, wrapping his arms around my neck. “And, um, don’t be surprised if half our conversations are me gushing about this new spokesman gig.”

I smoothed his hair. “I won’t be surprised, and I won’t complain. Promise.”

He just smiled, lifted his chin, and kissed me again.

Complain about him being this happy?

Not in this lifetime.

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CHAPTER 22

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DEVIN

Reaching into the mailbox always gave me a feeling of dread. How many more bills would there be this time?

Today, it was mostly junk, which would go straight into the recycling bin. Or in some cases, into the shredder, *then* the recycling bin.

But when I made it up to my apartment and started going through the mail, there were three envelopes that were decidedly not junk. As much as I would've loved to toss them into the shredder, they needed attention, and it didn't matter if I was too exhausted or broke to *pay* that attention. Couldn't I spend one evening just thinking about my new hockey-related gig? Or my hockey player boyfriend? Apparently not, because adulting never ended.

One of the can't-be-ignored envelopes contained a notice from Dallas's school that she was in danger of repeating the entire school year because of excessive absences. Just reading that all-too-familiar form letter made my heart sick. They wanted doctor's notes every time she missed school, but I couldn't take her to the doctor every time. I couldn't afford it, for one thing, and it also meant I had to take time away from work instead of working at home, which cut into my already slim bank of paid time off. And besides, when she had a migraine bad enough to keep her from going to school, taking her to the doctor only made things a hundred

times worse. As it was, her mom and I had to reluctantly send her to school when she was so hungover from a migraine that she could barely walk.

I didn't know how many times or how many ways I needed to explain this to the school before they got it through their heads. Dallas's grades were good—as good as could be expected when she had to miss school as much as she did. My kid was miserable, and the school just kept hammering us to send her to school *more* or at least take her to the doctor to prove we had a legitimate reason to keep her home.

Which brought me to the other two envelopes, which weren't any less depressing. One was a bill for Dallas's last visit to her useless pediatrician. The full amount, of course, since we hadn't met our gigantic deductible yet. And then there was a statement from some dental work I'd had done last summer. I'd made a payment plan with the dentist's office so they wouldn't send me to collections, but the balance was coming down *painfully* slowly.

Ugh. I needed to make more money. Maybe after I'd done the bill-paying shuffle later this evening, I'd peruse job sites again. Except as I'd explained to Jase, most places didn't let new employees take time off, especially *paid* time off, and I couldn't risk getting fired during the probationary period. Damn it.

I pushed the mail aside and started figuring out dinner. At least that didn't require a ton of thought. Ironically, because I'd already done all the thinking—like everything, meal-planning in this house required an exhausting degree of strategizing. Though she could eat dairy, cheese was a trigger for some reason, so I didn't even buy it. We'd learned through trial and error what foods and scents were triggers, and there was a laundry list of groceries and cleaning products that had been summarily banned from the house.

And it wasn’t just Dallas—I was one of those lucky fuckers with a peanut allergy. Of course, Dallas loved peanut butter, and despite it being a common trigger, it wasn’t one of hers. But she couldn’t eat it for at least twenty-four hours before coming to my place. One of the few things she could enjoy without worrying about her migraines, and her damn dad was allergic to it. My kid couldn’t win for losing.

But all that trial and error had given us a pretty decent list of things she could eat, and we’d come up with some recipes to add some flavor and variety where we could. Every two weeks, I came up with a meal plan to make sure I had everything on hand for my custody weeks. Tonight’s scheduled dinner was chicken that I’d marinated in a mild garlic sauce that Dallas loved (and was blessedly something she could eat), plus a few slices of steamed zucchini mixed with carrots and green beans. A little boring, and something we ate *all* the time, but under the circumstances, neither of us complained.

And all in all, I tried not to complain. The stress of snowballing bills, dwindling PTO, and the exhausting constant vigilance to keep Dallas’s migraines at bay as much as possible—it was hard, but I knew it could have been so much worse in so many ways. I had more tools now to help her than I’d had six months ago. Six months from now, God willing, I’d have more.

Could someone please give my kid a break? Please?

When dinner was ready, I tapped my knuckle on Dallas’s door. “Hey, kiddo. Hungry?”

There was some movement on the other side, and then the door opened. “Oh my God. Yes. I’m starving.”

“Why didn’t you say so? I’d have made something sooner.”

“Because I was drowning in stupid math homework and didn’t think about it.”

“Fair enough. Come on. Let’s eat.”

On the way back to the kitchen, the poster of Jase on the living room wall caught my eye, and I gulped. Every time I saw that damn thing, it made me anxious and guilty. Should I tell Dallas? Would she find out on her own if I didn't? Jase and I were keeping this quiet, but there was always that possibility someone with a long lens could get curious. The thought made my skin crawl anyway, but what if that was how my daughter found out about my new relationship?

I should tell her. Right?

When I thought a partner might stick around for a while, and once she and they were both ready, I'd introduce them. I'd worked hard to walk that fine line between letting her meet someone too soon and hiding someone from her for too long; I didn't want to lie to her, but I also didn't want her getting attached or—possibly worse—refusing to get attached to someone because they'd be gone like the last few. It was a delicate balance to say the least. Especially since several had bolted after the rubber had met the road and "my life has to revolve around my daughter's health" became more than just an abstract idea.

The situation with Jase was more complicated because of his high profile. I didn't have the same control over when and how to bring this relationship into her view. Plus now we were working together on the low stim nights. Sooner or later, Dallas was going to figure out Jase and I were still in contact. Or someone else would. Then what?

Well. One thing at a time.

First, dinner.

We both left our phones on the counter where we could hear them if something urgent came through or we got a call, but they wouldn't be a distraction during dinner.

As we ate, I said, "How's your homework coming?"

She made a miserable sound.

"Do you need help with it?"

"No." She jabbed a green bean with her fork. "It's just hard and stupid."

I chuckled. “Yeah, that sounds like homework. If you need help, though, just say so.”

Dallas nodded.

We ate in silence for a moment, and I flailed for something to fill that silence. Normally Dallas and I were fine like that. We didn’t have to be talking every minute of every meal. But whenever the conversation hit a lull, my mind shot right back to the place it kept going whenever she and I were home—*do I tell her about Jase?*

The more I thought about it… I mean, this relationship was very, very new, but if Jase and I kept seeing each other, *someone* was going to find out sooner or later. I wasn’t sure how I felt about potentially being pulled into the spotlight, but there was one thing I hadn’t had to question once since the beginning: that I absolutely did not want my daughter finding out about this relationship via the internet or gossip. And the fact was, the longer I waited, the more likely she was to hear it from someone else.

“So, um…” I stared down at my plate because I was a coward. “There’s… There’s something I think you should know. It’s nothing bad. Everything’s fine.” I met her worried eyes across the table. “I just don’t want you getting blindsided.”

She stared at me. “Uh. Okay?”

“Like I said—nothing bad.”

Dallas nodded, but she still looked nervous.

Clearing my throat, I set my fork down and folded my hands behind my plate. “So, I’ve been seeing someone.”

Her expression shifted from panic to…triumph? “I *knew* it!” Beaming, she wagged a finger at me. “I *knew* you were going out with someone!”

“What?” I laughed. “What do you mean, you knew?”

“Oh please.” She rolled her eyes. “Like I can’t tell when you’re dating someone.”

“I’m not that obvious.” Beat. “Am I?”

Another eyeroll.

I sighed with mock exasperation. “Okay. Okay. You were right.” Sobering a bit, I held her gaze. “So, the thing is, it’s very new, and I don’t know if it’s serious or what’s going on, so usually I wouldn’t say anything this early on, but I… Well, like I said, I don’t want you getting blindsided.”

She cocked her head. “How would I get blindsided?”

“Well.” I cleared my throat. “Because he’s, uh, kind of…” I drummed my fingers rapidly beside my plate of ignored food. “He’s kind of high-profile.”

The confused furrows deepened between her eyebrows. “High-profile? Like he’s famous or something?”

“Yeah. He’s, uh—”

Dallas gasped and clapped her hands over her mouth. “Oh my God!” she squeaked, hands still in place and muffling her voice. “You are *not* dating Jase Kelly.”

I laughed, my heart thumping and my face on fire. “I am dating Jase Kelly.”

Her hands fell into her lap, and she stared at me like I’d just casually told her we were moving to Mars. “You’re lying.”

“No. I’m—come on. Would I lie to you about that?”

“Okay, no, but…” She blinked. “I mean…*seriously?*”

I nodded. “Uh-huh. Seriously.”

“How did… I…” She shook herself. “How did you end up dating him?”

Chuckling, I shrugged, wondering just how red my face was right then. “Remember when he had the Snow Bears play for you?”

Eyes still huge, she nodded.

“Okay, well. We’d been emailing a bit to put that together, and afterward…” I shrugged again. “We just kind of kept emailing. And then I was at a game with Uncle Eric, and Jase saw me and asked if we wanted to go out for drinks with the team, and—”

“You went out with the Snow Bears?” Her jaw went slack. “Like… *The* Snow Bears?”

“Mmhmm. After that, we just kind of—”

A loud buzz turned both our heads. From its place on the counter beside hers, my phone vibrated.

My cheeks burned hotter.

Dallas eyed me. “Is that him? Is he texting you?”

“Calling, actually. It’s either him or your mom, yeah.”

We locked eyes across the table. Then she started laughing, and so did I. I couldn’t help it. This was one of most surreal, ridiculous moments I’d ever had with my kid. I’d just told her I was dating her hockey idol, and now he was calling me.

“Are you going to get it?” she asked, still giggling.

“I’ll call him back.” I watched her across the table. “To be serious, I wanted you to know so you don’t hear it from a tabloid or something. And I need this to stay between us for now. I mean, your mom knows.”

“Pfft. Like you could ever get anything past Mom.”

“I know, right? But do me a solid and keep this on the down-low, okay?”

“You don’t want people to know?”

“It’s not that we don’t want people to know—it’s that once people find out, everyone will know. Like…*everyone.* So we’re not making it public. Not right now. It’s still kind of a new thing, and who knows if it’ll keep going? But I at least wanted to be honest with you about it.” I paused, studying her. “And this really, *really* needs to stay between us. If you want to tell people I’m friends with him, that’s fine. But Jase isn’t out, and we—”

“You don’t want him getting outed. I get it.” She wrinkled her nose. “Ugh, I can’t imagine trying to date someone and worrying about the whole world finding out.”

“You’re twelve. I would hope you can’t imagine dating someone anyway.”

She rolled her eyes. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do. And yeah, it’s not easy. This is definitely some new territory. With him being… Well, him.”

“I bet.”

I studied her. “So, what do you think about this?”

“I don’t know. I mean, it’s kind of weird, my dad dating *Jase Kelly*. But he seemed like a nice guy when I met him, so I guess as long as he’s nice to you…” She shrugged.

“He is.” I couldn’t help smiling. “He’s a really nice guy.”

“Cool. So do I get to hang out with you guys one of these days?”

I was admittedly a little apprehensive about that, given my history of dating people who’d bolt and break her heart as well as mine, but I kept that to myself. “I’m sure we can figure something out.”

“Awesome.” She tsked. “I can’t believe I can’t tell any of my friends. But Mom knows?”

“Yep.”

“So Nick probably knows too, right?”

“He better not,” I said. “I asked your mom to keep it a secret, just like I’m asking you to.”

“Well, when he does find out…” She giggled as she cut off another piece of chicken. “He’s gonna be so jealous.”

I laughed, picking up my own fork again. “Pretty sure he’s straight, isn’t he?”

Dallas shrugged. “Bet he’d go gay for Jase Kelly.”

I snorted and rolled my eyes. “Really?”

“What?” She popped the chicken into her mouth. “It’s true.”

“I’m telling him you said that.”

“Go ahead,” she said unrepentantly. “Mom’ll probably back me up too.”

Sighing dramatically, I shook my head. “I don’t know how he deals with the two of you ganging up on him like that.”

“Probably by drooling over Jase Kelly.”

“*Dallas.*”

“What?”

I tried to give her a kind of stern look, but her *don't act like I'm wrong* expression made me laugh. This child was definitely her mother's daughter. "*Anyway.* I didn't screw up your focus for the night, did I? You can still do your homework after we're done eating?"

"Will you write my teacher a note saying you—"

"Not a prayer, kid."

She laughed. "Nah. I think I'll be good."

"That's what I thought."

We both chuckled, and we continued eating. When we'd finished, we both got up to take our dishes to the sink. On Fridays and Saturdays, it was her job to clean the kitchen after dinner, but the rest of the week, she was usually so slammed with schoolwork that I took care of the dishes. So, she was off the hook tonight, and she headed back toward her bedroom to resume doing homework.

"Let me know when you're ready for me to check your assignments," I called after her.

"Okay." She stopped in the kitchen doorway and turned around. "And thanks for telling me. About Jase."

"Don't mention it. Thanks for keeping it between us."

She nodded, then continued down the hall, and I released a breath as I leaned against a cabinet. Okay. There. It was out. Dallas knew. There was still no telling how long Jase and I could keep it from the press, but at least I'd beaten them to punch and told my kid.

I looked up at my phone, which was still and silent on the counter, and my heart fluttered as I smiled.

Time to call Jase back.

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CHAPTER 23

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JASE

I was finally back in town and could see Devin again. I was exhausted, and I could feel today's flight and the last few games in my bones, but I wasn't turning down sex with him for anything. I'd been counting down the days, the hours, and now the minutes until I was here, and on the way into the elevator, I was so excited I could barely breathe.

Before the elevator had fully stopped on Devin's floor, I could hear shouting on the outside. When the doors opened, the angry voices were clearer and louder.

I balked, but cautiously stepped out, alarm raising the hair on my neck. Then I realized one of the voices belonged to Devin, and though the alarm intensified, I walked faster.

I rounded the corner to find him in the hall, gesturing wildly and arguing with a woman who was standing in the doorway of what I assumed was her apartment.

"You can't tell me what to do in my own home!" the woman shouted in his face.

Devin made an exasperated sound. "I'm not trying to dictate what you do in your own home, but what you do affects my kid." He gestured sharply at his apartment across the hall. "What is she supposed to do? Just…not breathe because you want to burn incense?"

"It relaxes me," she snapped.

“And it gives her migraines! You can relax without incense. She *cannot* relax or even *function* while you’re burning it. What is so hard to understand?”

“You’ve already got peanut butter banned from the entire building. Now you want—”

“Because I’d just as soon not go into anaphylactic shock!” Devin threw up her hands. “Peanuts will *kill* me.”

“Oh for God’s sake. Peanuts don’t kill people.”

“Yes! They do!”

The woman didn’t respond. She just slammed the door in his face.

Devin closed his eyes and exhaled. “Goddammit.”

“Everything okay?” I asked.

He jumped, but when he looked at me, he smiled, though he still looked tired. “Hey. I’m sorry you had to see… uh…”

“It’s all right.” I glanced at the closed door. “What’s going on?”

Devin gestured at his own apartment. After he’d let us in, he blew out a breath. Shuffling across the room to the couch, he said, “I swear one of the biggest reasons I want to get a handle on my debt and save some money is so I can buy a house.” He dropped onto the couch. “It’s the only way I can be sure she has at least *one* place to go where there aren’t any scents or noises or lights or…” He sighed. “It should not be this difficult to give my kid a place to live, you know?”

I sat beside him. “No, it shouldn’t be. I didn’t realize people were so inconsiderate.”

“They get worse, believe it or not.”

“Really?”

He nodded, but didn’t elaborate. With another heavy sigh, he leaned forward, elbows on his knees as he rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. “It’s just so frustrating, you know? I can’t get our neighbors to be considerate. I can’t take her to things. Whenever we go out to eat, I have

to research ahead of time to make sure there's nothing on the menu that'll set her off if someone at the next table orders it. Every year, we have to fight with parents who are pissed off that the school asks them not to let their kids bring or wear anything scented to school." Dropping his hand, he turned an exhausted look on me. "Hell, when we went to her neurologist's office? Some lady walked in wearing perfume so strong it made me gag, and by the time we got called back to see the doctor, Dallas was getting a migraine. I just… All I want is for my kid to be able to live a normal life. The world is every other kid's oyster, but it's Dallas's minefield, and it's so, *so* fucking frustrating."

The analogy made my spine straighten, reminding me of my old coach's description of me being the oyster who obsessed over every grain of sand. This version was a different angle, but I definitely got it.

"Damn." I wrapped my arm around him. "I'm sorry."

He leaned against me, shoulders sagging under my arm. "People get on my case for being over-protective or trying to shelter my daughter. It's not like I'm being a helicopter parent and trying to control everything she sees and hears. I'm just trying to keep her from being in pain, you know?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I get that."

"I'm sorry." He sat up and looked at me. "I know you were expecting—"

"It's okay." I squeezed his knee. "I'm not going to tell you to drop trou and get on with it after…" I waved a hand toward the door.

He smiled faintly. "Thanks. Do you, um, want a beer or something?"

"Sure. Thanks."

He got us a couple of beers, and we settled onto the couch together. No, we weren't tangled up in bed, but I didn't mind. Truth be told, as fun as the sex was, and as aggravated as he was tonight, I liked the fact that we didn't spend all our time together in bed. These days, whenever I

came to his place or he came to mine, we usually hung out on the couch and just talked for a while. Catching up about our days, about games I'd played or we'd watched. Just… talking. Not usually because his neighbor had been a fiery asshole, but still.

Oh, we'd end up in bed before too long, but this was nice too, especially as Devin relaxed and our conversation meandered away from his neighbor's bullshit to everything from the crap he dealt with at work to some of the practical jokes my teammates played on buses and planes.

"The only rule," I was saying, "is that nobody pranks Kuznetsov on a plane."

"Why's that?"

"He's *terrified* of flying."

"Oh. Wow. I want to say I'm surprised some of the guys don't fuck with him, but they don't seem to take things like that too far."

"Nah, we're all assholes to each other, but there are lines, and everyone is good about not crossing them." I laughed. "That, or everyone's heard all the goalies bitch about how much it hurts to get hit by a Kuznetsov slapshot, and nobody wants to risk it because we don't wear as much gear as the goalies."

Devin laughed, making my heart flutter like it did every damn time. "Yeah, I've never played, but it seems like getting hit with a puck would fucking *hurt*."

I whistled. "*Oh*, yeah. It happens, but nobody wants to put themselves in that guy's crosshairs."

"Doesn't seem like anyone would want to put themselves in yours either. I was in the second row once when one of your shots came up and hit the glass." He chuckled. "I swear, everyone in the entire section about jumped out of our skin."

"Oh, yeah, we do that on purpose." I sipped my beer. "It's a good way to make sure the fans aren't dozing off."

Devin snorted and rolled his eyes. “You know, I wouldn’t actually be surprised if that turned out to be true. Not that any of us are in danger of falling asleep during a Snow Bears game. Have a heart attack, maybe”—he shot me a pointed look—“but not fall asleep.”

I flashed him a grin, which made him laugh again.

A thump turned both our heads. Not surprisingly, Tony the cat was on the coffee table, giving us judgy looks. He did that a lot. After he’d scowled at us for a moment, he made a huge gesture stretching across the gap between the table and the couch. Once he was all the way on the couch, he usually curled up in Devin’s lap, but this time, he walked onto my lap and eyed me.

“Hey, kitty.” I petted him, and he started purring. Kneading, too, and I gasped as little needles poked through my jeans. “Uh. Hey. That kinda hurts.” I unstuck one of his claws.

Devin laughed, scratching Tony’s chin. “Yeah, he does that. Just be glad you don’t have food.”

I glanced at him as I petted Tony. “Oh yeah?”

“Mmhmm. He’ll make *sure* you don’t forget he’s there.”

“What?” I looked at Tony, who was loving getting petted and scratched by two people. “You don’t do that, do you?”

He just purred louder.

“If you want to move him,” Devin said, “you can put him on the blanket over there, or I can take him.”

“Nah, he’s good.” I popped another claw free. “Just didn’t expect it.”

Not giving a damn, Tony walked in a few tight circles on my lap, then flopped over, and he held on to my jeans so he didn’t slide off.

“Uh. Make yourself comfy, dude.”

“He will, don’t worry.” Devin tousled Tony’s fur. “Little traitor.”

Tony looked at him, eyes narrow, and purred even louder as he kept kneading my leg.

“Oh, and you’re smug about it too,” I said. “You cute little asshole.”

“That’s him.” Devin laughed, but then it faded to a soft smile. “For the record, it usually takes him months to warm up enough to someone to get into their laps. So, apparently he likes you.”

“Aww.” I scratched under Tony’s chin. “He likes me. Yes he does.”

Tony scrunched up his face and probably tried to look annoyed, but he was still purring, so the effect didn’t really take.

“Both of my kids like you,” Devin said. “They’re both pretty good judges of character, too.”

I met his gaze. “Yeah?”

Still smiling, he nodded and put his hand on my knee. “Oh yeah. I mean, Dallas has only met you once, but I’m pretty sure she’s—hey!” He jerked his hand back. “Dude, what the hell?”

Tony pulled his paw back from apparently swatting at Devin, and he tucked it under himself, still looking exceptionally smug.

I chuckled. “Okay, so you’re saying I’ve won over the kid that’s tougher to please?”

“Yes, definitely.” Gaze fixed on the cat, his smile faded a bit, and his brow creased.

“Hey.” I touched his leg. “What’s up?”

“I, um…” He cleared his throat and met my gaze. “Well, as long as we’re on the subject of Dallas…” He moistened his lips. “She knows about us. I, um, I told her.”

I gulped. “You did? Uh, how did she take it?”

“Well, she certainly wasn’t upset about it,” he said with an uneasy laugh. “She didn’t believe me at first, actually.”

“What? Why not?”

He shot me a look. “Are you kidding? As far as she’s concerned, her boring accountant dad is batting just a *hair* out of his league by landing, well, you.”

“Pfft.” I squeezed his leg. “All that league bullshit is stupid. I’m just a guy.”

“A guy who my cat has already decided he likes.”

I glanced down at Tony, who was watching me with a perfectly content expression on his face. Grinning, I looked at Devin. “Okay, so maybe I’m not *just* a guy.”

He laughed.

“To be serious, though,” I said. “She’s not upset?”

“Are you kidding? She adores you. And if you’re dating me, then she’ll probably get to meet you again. She’s, uh, definitely onboard with that.” He paused, sobering. “But there’s no pressure to do that. I’d *like* to have you spend some time with her, but we don’t have to rush that. Mostly, I just wanted her to know about us before some tabloid found out.”

A wave of panic ran through me, but I managed to tamp it down for the moment. “Ugh. Yeah. I’ve been dreading that. I should probably come out to my family before a tabloid outs me.”

Devin’s forehead creased with concern. “I don’t want to add any pressure to what we’re doing. I just… If someone finds out about us, and it gets out, I’d rather have her hear it from me than anyone else.”

“Yeah, I get that. Definitely.”

He searched my eyes. “So it’s okay? That she knows? She understands that you’re not out and that we need to keep this on the DL, but… I mean, *is* that okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, of course.” I absently petted Tony. “I’ve just, uh, never dated anyone with a kid before. It’s kind of new territory, you know?”

“I get that. Totally. Well, we don’t have to rush into that part. She knows we’re dating. She won’t find out about it from a tabloid.” He shrugged. “That’s the important thing.”

I nodded. Meeting Dallas as a fan had been nerve racking because I’d worried that everything I’d arranged for her wouldn’t be enough. After all, she was a big fan who

couldn’t come to games, and I’d been trying to make up for that as much as possible.

Now? Jesus fuck. Now I’d be meeting her again as her dad’s…boyfriend? Partner? The guy he was dating, anyway.

He must have seen my apprehension, because he touched my face and brought me closer. “Whenever you’re ready, no rush.”

Grinning despite my nerves, I snaked an arm around him. “In the meantime, how about spending time with just you?”

Devin returned the grin. “Yeah I don’t see myself saying no to that.”

Then he kissed me, and that kiss went on, and my nerves about the future steadily gave way to excitement about tonight.

I leaned closer to Devin, and Tony abruptly got up off my lap and hopped down, probably annoyed with us.

The cat’s movement reminded me that the world still existed outside this embrace, and it occurred to me that it hadn’t been all that long since I’d walked in on Devin arguing with his shitty neighbor. Was he really okay brushing that aside and fooling around with me?

I looked in his eyes. “You sure about this tonight? We can just take it easy if you want to.”

“Oh, I’m sure about this.” He slid closer to me, and as his thigh pressed against mine, he said, “I don’t want to think about anything else tonight.” He carded his fingers through my hair. “Just you.”

And then he kissed me, and… oh, yeah. This I could do. I couldn’t think of a damn thing I could do to help with all the shit he and Dallas went through, but give him something else to think about for a little while? On it. I knew from experience distractions weren’t solutions, but they sure didn’t hurt anything either. For me, they sometimes meant the different between pulling myself up off the floor and just giving in to my brain’s bullshit.

Yeah, I was nervous as hell about meeting Dallas again, and about how she actually felt about me dating her dad. Yeah, I'd be losing sleep over it for a while.

But right now, Devin's kiss and his touch had me too distracted to worry about anything except him, so I decided everything else could wait. Tonight, I had him, and that was all I had to think about.

"Have I mentioned lately," he murmured, "that I love how you kiss?"

"Hmm, no." I brushed my lips across his. "But I was getting that impression."

"Well, just in case it wasn't absolutely clear…" He slid a hand up into my hair. "I *love* the way you kiss."

"Mmm, likewise," I murmured between kisses. "And, um… The bed might be more comfortable than the couch."

"Hmm, you're right." Devin kissed me again, then stood. "Let's go find out."

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CHAPTER 24

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DEVIN

Sinking into bed under Jase, hot skin against hot skin, was never going to get old. Maybe because we saw each other in person so sporadically. Maybe just because sex with him was always so, *so* good. Whatever. We were in my bed now, his hips between my thighs and his lips skating up the side of my neck, and I loved every second of it.

He was still nervous in bed sometimes, but he was a lot surer of himself than he'd been in the beginning. When he kissed, he didn't hold back. When the clothes came off and we were fooling around like we were now, he tried new things. Sometimes he'd ask first, like he had the first time he'd wanted to finger me while he went down on me. Other times, he'd just go for it, like nibbling my earlobe or running his tongue around my nipple. I loved it. The confidence, the attentiveness, the way he was so eager to find new ways to turn me on, and the way he'd grin whenever I shivered or my breath hitched.

I gently rolled him onto his back and started kissing down his neck, then his chest. He grabbed handfuls of the sheets and squirmed—he had to have learned by now what it meant when I started kissing on that trajectory—and knowing he was coming unglued from anticipation, I was instantly so turned on I could barely think. With every soft

kiss I trailed down his chest and belly, my own body tingled with need.

"Oh fuck, baby," he whispered.

I looked up from planting a featherlight kiss on his hipbone. "I haven't even done anything."

"Yeah, you have."

I grinned, kissed the same spot again, and then—

"Oh my God," he moaned. "Oh, yeah."

With Jase, I'd rediscovered one of those things I'd loved in the past: giving long, unhurried blowjobs. When I'd realized he was perfectly happy to lie back and let me lick and suck his dick for ages, I knew I'd hit the jackpot.

Tonight, like he often did, he sat up against the headboard, fingers lazily running through my hair as I took my sweet time teasing his rock-hard cock. Long, slow licks all the way from base to tip. Swirling the head or teasing his balls with my tongue.

"Fuck, yeah," he groaned, fingers twitching in my hair. "That's so good."

I hummed around his cock, then deep-throated him just to make him whimper.

"Let me…" He sucked in a breath. "Let's switch."

Ooh, just the thought of that talented, eager mouth on my cock made me hot all over. Except I was enjoying the hell out of having *my* mouth on *his* cock.

"I have a better idea." I shifted around, and he quickly got the message, and fuck me, but it didn't get any better than this—lazily sixty-nining with someone who was as happy to spend forever blowing me as I was to spend it blowing him. I loved giving as much as receiving, and he seemed to as well, and the feedback loop of decadent, languid oral was the definition of heaven as far as I was concerned.

Jase stopped for a second, then gently nudged my thigh. When I parted my legs, he teased my hole with a spit-slick finger, and I groaned around his cock. I didn't even know if

he wanted to fuck or if he just wanted to finger me while he went down on me, but either option was fine by me. Oh, God, this was perfect. I couldn't resist rocking my hips, pushing my dick into his mouth, and he hummed his encouragement as he kept on driving me wild with his mouth and his fingers. I poured all that arousal into blowing him, and from the way he trembled and moaned, he was loving it too.

He kept taking me higher, and finally, I had to pull my mouth off him and mumble, "Keep… Keep that up, and you'll make me come."

He licked up the length of my cock. "Can't have that. I haven't fucked you yet."

Oh, God, yes.

He slid his fingers free and came up to kiss me. "Turn over. I'll get the lube."

"Magic words," I said with a quiet laugh, and after one more kiss, I turned onto my stomach.

He grabbed the lube and molded himself to me. I thought he'd go right to fucking me, but instead, he pushed his fingers in again.

"Jase…"

"I'll get there," he taunted in my ear. "Patience."

"Ungh, you're a bastard."

He huffed a laugh against my skin. As he fingered me, Jase kissed up and down the back of my neck, and I closed my eyes, lifted my hips a little, and stroked myself slowly. Any time I was in bed with him, I ended up so turned on I could barely stand it, and tonight was no exception. My God, I was ready to come unraveled. I'd been with guys before who didn't like taking a lot of time to prep—as far as they were concerned, once I was ready for them, what was the point?

Jase got it. He got that I loved everything about foreplay, including being fingered until long after I could comfortably take his dick. Then when he did finally fuck

me, I'd be shaking with need, and I'd come hard enough to piss off the neighbors. In fact, I was already close to that point.

"More," I pleaded. "Jase…"

"You ready for me?" The grin in his voice was almost as tantalizing as the question itself.

"Mmm, you know I am."

"Uh-huh." He kissed below my ear. "I do." But he pushed his fingers in again, and I moaned as he nibbled my ear and kept right on fingering me.

"Jase… Please…" I rocked my hips, riding his fingers and fucking into my own hand. "*Please*."

His lips curved into a grin against my neck as his fingers crooked inside me, and he teased my prostate as he murmured, "You want my dick?"

"*Yes*. Fuck. *Now*."

He kissed my neck, and I swear to God, I almost came as he slipped his fingers free. "Gimme a sec."

There was some movement behind me. The click of the lube bottle. The whisper of his hand sliding up and down his slick cock. Then he pressed against me again, and I closed my eyes and swore as he pushed into me. I was so well-prepped, he slid in easily. No resistance at all. With only a few strokes, he was all the way in, and I was all the way out of my mind.

He could have picked up speed and started pounding me —and on some nights, I'd have begged him to—but he stayed slow and easy. I could get drunk on this. Fucking drown in it. He wasn't in any hurry. I wasn't in any hurry. Just sex because it felt good, because we enjoyed every second and every stroke, not because either of us was in some rush to come.

This was yet another way Jase was head and shoulders above anyone else I'd been with. With a lot of guys I'd dated, I'd been able to take or leave anal. With Jase? Oh my God, I was hooked. Especially when he rode me from

behind, and even better like he was doing now—when he had me all the way down on the mattress and he molded himself to me as he rocked his hips. I loved the feeling of his broad, powerful body moving on top of mine while his cock moved inside me.

His slow, smooth rhythm started to speed up and turn more frantic. Hot huffs of breath rushed past my neck, and the bedframe protested as strokes became thrusts. I grabbed a headboard slat with one hand, kept stroking myself with the other, and only managed desperate, wordless sounds that hopefully told him yes, yes, more.

They must have, because he gave me more. Harder. Deeper. Rougher. The huffs of breath turned into throaty grunts, and he used every bit of the power in his legs and hips to drive himself as deep as possible while I fell apart underneath him.

“Oh yeah,” I moaned. “Don’t stop.”

A long, low groan vibrated against my neck. Then he bit my shoulder. *Hard*. Instantly, I was there, coming all over my hand and the sheets as he kept fucking me, and then he cried out and forced himself all the way in as he shuddered and jerked on top of me.

We both relaxed. He pressed his forehead to my shoulder, and we both just trembled and breathed for a moment. Even after he’d pulled out, we still lay there, shaky and panting.

Eventually, we got up and made it into the shower. Of course we spent half that time kissing and holding each other—chalk that up as yet another thing I loved about the intimacy with Jase. That, and when we returned to bed, cuddled up in the middle of the mattress, and just talked in between gently kissing and touching.

“I love my job,” he murmured at one point, “but I gotta say—I’m really looking forward to the off season.”

“Oh yeah? Why’s that?”

“So I’m not gone all the time.” He watching his palm slide up my forearm. “Being on the road didn’t used to bother me, but these days…”

“You know we’ll probably kill each other during the off season, right?”

Jase laughed. “Well, I am supposed to keep up my physical conditioning during that time, so…”

“Dude. I’ve got stamina, but I don’t think I have ‘keep a professional hockey player in playing condition’ stamina.”

He snickered. “I mean, we could work up to that.”

“Oh my God.” I groaned. “You really are going to kill me.”

“Nah.” He kissed my forehead. “You might not be walking very well, but…”

“*Great*.”

Jase wrapped his arms around me and kissed me again. “Nah, the only way I’d keep you from walking is if I taught you to skate.”

I arched an eyebrow. “That’s not much of a selling point, you know.”

“It’s just while you’re getting the hang of it. Once you do, you’ll be fine.”

Squinting at him, I said, “So you say.”

“Oh come on, you’d probably love it. It’s fun!”

“Hmm. Maybe. Dallas has been begging me for lessons for ages, but I don’t think I’m quite brave enough to do it myself.”

He held my gaze, turning a bit serious. “You know, if she wants to learn to skate…” His forehead creased. “I could give her a few lessons.”

“Really?”

“Well, yeah.” He chuckled with a hint of self-consciousness. “I do know how to skate.”

“You do, that’s true. And I think she’d love that. Like I said, she’s a hell of a lot braver than I am.”

Jase cocked his head. “You’re really afraid to skate?”

“I, um… I mean, call me irrational, but the prospect of hurtling around on ice while wearing knife shoes just doesn’t seem safe. That’s why I haven’t let Dallas do it either.”

He laughed. “Knife shoes. I love it. Really, though, it’s not bad once you get the hang of it. And you start slow. Like, really slow.” He paused, then ventured, “I could teach both of you.”

“Well, uh… Maybe. We’ll see. Just, uh, don’t judge me if I’m nervous. Or if I suck at it.”

“I won’t.” He pressed a kiss to my forehead. “Practice arena is open tomorrow morning. You game?”

“Hmm. I’m not quite that brave yet, but I’m pretty sure I know someone who would be all over that opportunity.”

“I STILL CAN’T BELIEVE I’M GETTING A LESSON FROM JASE Kelly,” Dallas said as I pulled into the practice arena’s parking lot. “This is *amazing*.”

Smiling, I parked the car. With as few things as Dallas was able to do these days, I was thrilled to see her this excited about something.

We were halfway to the arena when the door opened, and Dallas stopped so quickly her sneaker squeaked on the pavement. “Oh my God.”

“What?” I asked with feigned innocence. “This is your skating coach.”

Jase laughed. “Hey, Dallas. You ready to skate?”

She stared at him, instantly starstruck. Of course I surreptitiously snapped a picture on my phone—the look on her face was too priceless not to. Finally, she managed, “You’re…really going to teach me to skate? And you’re really dating my dad?”

Blushing, Jase nodded, and he stole a glance at me as he said, “Yes, I’m really dating your dad. And yes, I’m really going to teach you to skate.”

“Holy shit.”

“Dallas!” I laughed. “Really?”

She blushed too, and looked…not quite sheepish, but close. “Sorry.”

Jase and I just chuckled, and he led us inside.

Skates weren’t exactly cheap, and I was hesitant to buy a pair until I knew if Dallas wanted to stick with this. The arena the team used for practice didn’t rent them out, but fortunately, one of Jase’s teammates had a daughter who wore the same size skates as Dallas, and they generously let us borrow them for her first lesson.

Jase took us through the locker room and right to the bench where players would sit during a game. “How are the lights for you?”

Dallas looked around. “They’re okay. If they’re too much, I brought my sunglasses.” She set her bag on the bench. “But I’m think I’m okay.”

“All right.” He grinned. “Let’s put on your skates.” She sat on the bench, and while I watched, he helped her put on her skates, making sure they were comfortable and laced properly. Then he put on his own, and they headed for the ice.

Jase was, not surprisingly, more adept at walking in his skates than she was, but he hung back and kept an eye on her, offering his hand in case she needed the support. She did all right just holding on to the rail, though.

At the edge of the rink, he stepped out onto the ice and turned to her. He extended his hand again. “Hold on to me, and put your left foot on the ice.”

She hesitated, but took his hand. Then, moving a little unsteadily, she put her left skate on the ice.

“Good. Now the other.”

Still unsteady, she moved the second skate onto the ice. She almost slipped, but she kept hold of his arm, and he didn't waver at all.

"Why can't I do this?" she asked.

"It's okay. You're still finding your footing." He put his other hand on her shoulder, helping to steady her. "Keep your core tight." He patted his stomach before resting his hand on her shoulder again. "Bring your knees in just a little so you're on your inside edges, and—good. That's right. Bend your knees a touch. Little more. Not that much. Perfect." He looked at her. "How's your balance now?"

She stood for a moment. Slowly, she released his arm. Then he let go of her shoulder.

"You good?" he asked.

"I think so."

"It's okay if you're not. You've never done this before. You don't want to lean on me too much because then you won't find your balance, but you can take as long as you need to make sure you're solid on your skates. We won't move until you're ready."

Dallas nodded slowly, as if she were afraid a sudden movement would throw off her precarious balance. "Is this… Are my knees right?"

He looked down and nodded. "Yep. Keep them almost over your toes."

She glanced down too, and adjusted her stance a little.

"How do you feel?"

"Better."

"You want to try moving?"

She considered it, then nodded. "Yeah."

"Okay, we're going to keep it pretty basic. You're just learning how to move and keep your balance right now. Nothing fancy."

Dallas nodded again, swallowing nervously.

"So the first thing you want to do is watch me." He skated away from her and made a small circle before

stopping, facing her. “This is how you’re going to move forward.” He gestured at his skates. “I want to go straight with my right skate first. So I’m going to keep my right skate just like this—straightforward. And then with my left foot…” He pushed off with the other skate, sending him forward in a perfectly straight line.

“Why do I bet this looks easier than it is?” Dallas asked dubiously.

Jase smiled as he came back. “It takes practice, but you’ll be fine. And I’ll help you stay up.” His expression turned serious. “Fair warning, though, I *am* going to let you fall sometimes. You *need* to fall when you’re moving this slow so you learn how to land. If the first time you fall is when you’re skating as fast as I do, you’re probably going to break something.”

Dallas nodded.

Jase glanced at me, suddenly a little nervous with *is that okay?* written all over his face.

“You’re the coach,” I said with a shrug. I wasn’t thrilled with the idea of Dallas falling on the ice, but he was right—it was better she learn what it felt like to fall while she was still taking baby steps than when she was zooming around at high speeds. It brought to mind some of the bruises she’d gotten from crawling into the coffee table or a doorframe when she was little—it hurt, and it was heartbreaking, but it meant she was more cautious of the hard corners and sharp edges once she was walking and running.

“Okay.” Jase skated backwards a few feet. “You’re going to do like I did a minute ago—use your other skate to push off. Keep your eyes on me, not your feet. That’s it. Right skate pointed at me, left foot—good! That’s good!”

With a little squeal of delight and maybe some fear, Dallas glided forward.

“Nice!” I said, pretending my stomach wasn’t doing somersaults as I watched my kid on ice skates.

“Good job.” Jase skated backwards a little more. “Try again.”

She steadied herself, then tried again, pointing her skate at Jase and pushing off with the other. This time, though, she wobbled a little, flailed her arms, and then toppled onto the ice. I jumped up off the bench as my heart jumped into my throat, but Jase crouched beside her and offered his hand. With his help, she got back up, and she held on to his arm as she brushed off her pants.

“You okay?” I called out.

Dallas gave me a thumbs up. “I’m good.”

I nodded and relaxed onto the bench again.

They continued their lesson, and as he carefully and patiently helped her learn to move, stop, and turn, I just stared at both of them.

Without all his usual gear on, he was this surreal combination of Jase Kelly the professional hockey player and Jase, the man I was somehow dating, and together, they were teaching my daughter how to ice skate.

She quickly went from wobbling like a newborn fawn to moving confidently on her skates. Still slow, still doing just basic maneuvers, but she was steadier now than at the start. She fell a few times, but Jase had taught her how to land without hurting herself, and she quickly learned to get up on her own. By the time the two of them skated to a stop in front of the bench, she was doing impressively well, at least by my standards.

“I think that’s enough for one lesson.” Jase smiled. “You’re doing great.”

She turned to him, beaming. “Really?”

“Definitely. Little more practice, and this will be as easy as walking.”

Dallas rubbed her hip gingerly. “How long did it take you to learn to skate the way you do? That fast, I mean?”

Jase chuckled. “A while. Hockey moves a lot slower when you’re little, believe me.”

“Little?” I asked. “How old were you when you started playing?”

“Three.”

“*Three?*” Dallas and I both asked.

“Yep. My parents are both big hockey fans, and they thought it would be cute to watch us play when we were that little. Plus I wanted to do what my big brother was doing, and anyway, it gave us something to do in the winter besides try to kill each other.”

“You sure they weren’t secretly hoping you’d become pro hockey players?”

“Oh, I wonder sometimes. But I mean, it’s pretty low key at that age, and it meant we could go burn off some energy when it was too cold to play outside.”

“So instead of fighting with your brother,” I said, “they sent you to fight with other hockey players?”

Jase shrugged. “Hockey players wear pads and visors and stuff. And there are rules. When it was me and my brother on the farm?” He grimaced. “That shit was no holds barred.” He glanced at Dallas. “Err, I mean, it was no holds barred.”

She giggled. I rolled my eyes.

“So, before we’re totally done, can I, um…” Dallas blushed, dropping her gaze.

“Hmm?” Jase asked.

I nudged her shoulder. “Go on.”

She glanced up at me, then looked at him. “Can you show us the way you skate?” She gestured at the ice. “It’s so cool watching hockey players skate.”

Jase grinned. “Sure.”

And with that, he skated away from the wall, and…holy shit, that man could skate. I knew he could. I’d seen him do it. But watching him like this? Alone on the ice without any of his gear? There was something mesmerizing about the way he moved. The distinctive sway of his shoulders when he slowed down. How low he got when he was fast. The

sharp turns. The sudden stops with the spray of ice chips Just the *speed*.

“Dad. Don’t drool.”

“I am not drooling.”

Beside me, she was grinning almost as big as she had the night the Snow Bears had played for her and me. “You have the coolest boyfriend *ever*.”

“Yeah. He’s pretty cool.”

And watching him skate is nowhere near as amazing as watching him teach my kid to skate.

Jase joined us at the bench again, and he was a little out of breath when he stopped. “Skate like that, you mean?”

“Yes!” Dallas beamed. “That is so cool! Will I ever be able to go that fast?”

“Maybe. Just have to practice and work up to it.”

She turned her grin on me. “Maybe I could play hockey!”

My stomach dropped into my feet. “Uh…you might have to take that up with your mother.”

She tsked and rolled her eyes. “Oh my God, Dad.”

I laughed. “Go put your shoes on.”

Jase helped her out of her skates, and then Dallas took her bag and went into the restroom to change clothes. As soon as we were alone, I turned to Jase and wrapped an arm around him. “Thank you. I think you just made her entire month.”

“Good. Glad to hear it.”

“And, um…” I glanced in the direction Dallas had gone, then looked up at him. “By the way, I told her she can tell her friends that you and I are friends, and that you’re teaching her to skate. So she can still tell them all about this without outing us. Or you.”

“Oh. Yeah, that’s cool. I’m glad you thought of it.” He smiled and pressed a quick kiss to my lips. “Any time she wants another lesson, just let me know.”

“I will.”

I hope she does, too, because I love watching you two skate together.

On our way out of the practice arena, I caught a glimpse of a poster of him—one of the big floor-to-ceiling ones between similar images of Sasha Kuznetsov and Zane Maddox. He was in his home jersey, his hair and face drenched in sweat, expression tight with fierce concentration, and the camera had caught him in the middle of firing the puck and a spray of ice chips at an unseen goal.

I'd seen the image before, but it was so weird to see it now after I'd just watched him in the arena with Dallas, and after we'd shared that tender little moment together.

When I'd thrown that hat out onto the ice a lifetime ago, I'd been hoping to somehow connect with Dallas's sports idol so she could meet him and get an autograph.

I had never in a million years, not even in my wildest fantasies, imagined I'd be walking out of a practice arena with Jase and Dallas so we could grab lunch before he headed to the stadium for tonight's game. That the man who would, in a few hours, be tearing up the ice the way we'd watched him do so many times, was the same man who had started teaching my daughter to skate while I'd watched from the bench, as lovestruck as I was starstruck.

All I'd hoped for was an autograph and a photo for my kid.

Now I was pretty damn sure I was falling fast and hard for Jase Kelly.

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CHAPTER 25

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JASE

The day after Devin's lesson, I had a few hours to kill before I had to be at the airport for an evening flight. Naturally, there was one person I wanted to spend it with.

Over homemade pizza in my condo—we had, after all, worked up an appetite—we hung out and just talked like we always did.

As Devin pulled another slice off the pan, he said, "So Richard finally emailed me this morning."

I straightened. "Did he?"

Devin nodded, eyes full of excitement. "He said he's got several sponsors onboard, and your coach and general manager think it's a good idea. As long as we're not fucking up the team right before actual games, they're onboard."

"That's great!" I sipped my drink. "Does he have any idea when the first event will be?"

"He's not sure yet. We're shooting some ideas back and forth, and he has a bunch more potential sponsors he wants to talk to. Plus he wants me to get in touch with some of the support groups that Dallas's mom goes to and find out what kind of needs they have for an event like this. So it's going to take some time to put it together, but he's really covering all the bases."

"Awesome. I'm really glad to hear he's running with this. Sounds like you'll have your hands full."

“I could think of worse things, believe me.”

“Well, let me know if there’s any way I can help.”

“I will. Definitely.” He took a bite of pizza. “Oh, and by the way? Dallas hasn’t stopped raving about her lesson.”

“Yeah?”

Devin’s smile made my heart go wild. “She spent half the day yesterday watching skating tutorials on YouTube so she’ll be ready for her next one.”

I laughed. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope. She is dead serious about learning this.”

“Great.” I wiped some grease off my fingertips. “Whenever she’s ready, let me know. I’m more than happy to teach her.”

“She’ll definitely be ready whenever you are.” He chuckled. “She didn’t even care that she was sore the next day, and she was showing off her bumps and bruises to her mom and stepdad.”

“They, uh, weren’t upset about that?”

“Oh God, no. They knew she’d been ice skating, and I told them she’d taken a few falls. She’s a tough kid. You should’ve seen her when she got back from horseback riding camp.”

“Really?”

He groaned. “Nick was ready to call CPS and report the camp, but we were like, slow your roll, dude. As soon as Dallas started bragging about how this bruise came from when her horse threw her, but she got back on anyway, and how that welt came from a horse trying to yank a lead rope out of her hand, but she held on… Yeah, no, we weren’t worried.”

“That’s good. I just hope they don’t think I was letting her get hurt for the hell of it.”

“No, no, not at all.” He shook his head. “I explained the same thing you did—that it’s better to let her fall a few times while she’s crawling than have her do it for the first time when she’s running.”

I exhaled, definitely relieved. “Okay, good. So they don’t mind her taking more lessons?”

“Hell, no. Don’t be surprised if they come along one of these days, too.” He grinned. “Nick’s a big fan, and Haley’s been dying to meet this guy I’m dating.”

“Really? They want to meet me?”

“Of course. They always want to meet whoever I’m dating, especially once Dallas meets them. And let’s face it—you’re you. If my office ever finds out we’re dating, they’re all going to want a private signing or something.”

I laughed, some heat rushing into my face. “Yeah, we’ll see.”

Devin chuckled, but then he sobered a bit and held my gaze. “It wasn’t weird for you, was it? Meeting my daughter as…well, as your boyfriend’s daughter, not just a fan?”

“No, no. It…” I chewed thoughtfully on a bite of pizza. “Funny thing is, I thought it would be, but when it actually happened, I was so focused on teaching her to skate, I guess I didn’t really think about it.”

“Huh. So it was kind of a distraction?”

“I guess it was. I forgot to be nervous about it.”

Devin smiled and reached across the table for my hand. “Good. Because she really enjoyed meeting you again, and I loved watching the two of you.”

“Really?”

“Are you kidding?” He squeezed my hand before letting it go. As he picked up his pizza slice again, he said, “It was great. When I wasn’t almost having heart failure whenever she fell.”

I laughed softly. “She didn’t fall that much.”

“No, but it was enough to freak out her father.”

“Okay, maybe.” I arched an eyebrow. “So when are you going to try skating?”

“Hmm, how about penciling me in for the twelfth of never?”

“Oh, come on. You might like it!”

Devin looked dubious as he chewed another bite of pizza.

I nudged his foot under the table. “You won’t know until you try it.”

His lips quirked. “I have to admit, Dallas’s enthusiasm *is* kind of rubbing off. And it *did* look fun.”

“Well…” I pulled a green pepper off my pizza slice and popped it in my mouth. “Say when.”

He seemed to consider it for a moment. “Maybe when you’re back in town?”

“You serious?”

Another moment of consideration, then he exhaled. “Why the hell not? Let’s do this.”

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CHAPTER 26

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DEVIN

"I STAND BY WHAT I SAID—DALLAS IS A HELL OF A LOT BRAVER than I am."

"You're good." Jase skated backwards a few feet and beckoned me closer. "Everyone's nervous their first time on the ice."

I looked down at my skates and then the ice that I was trying to work up the courage to step out on. Arching an eyebrow, I met his gaze again. "So you're saying everyone's nervous their first time, hmm?"

He blushed and laughed. "Just skate."

Skate. Right. That was why we were here.

"Would you think less of me if I admitted to being *really* nervous?"

"Not at all." He came a bit closer and held out a gloved hand. "You'll be fine. Just go slow."

"You have to admit, the innuendos kind of write themselves here." But I reached for his hand, and despite a million nerves, put a skate on the ice. To my surprise, my foot didn't suddenly shoot out from under me and drop me on my ass. It didn't feel overly stable, but it was less precarious than I'd anticipated.

Reminding myself that my daughter had done this, and that Jase was giving me support, I carefully added the second foot.

Oh shit. I was ice skating.

Well. Kind of. I wasn't moving, but I was on top of two skates that were on ice. Ice skating in place? Something like that.

"All right." I met Jase's eyes. "Now what?"

He released my hand, but kept his hovering there for a second as if he thought I might grab on again. When I didn't, he gestured down at his legs. "Okay, so you're gonna want to bend your knees a bit." He bent his. "Not so far that you can't see your toes anymore."

I did, looking down to make sure I wasn't overdoing it. As soon as I was positioned properly, a faint burn materialized in my thighs. That subtle warning that my muscles weren't thrilled about this new exertion. "I'm going to feel this in my quads later, aren't I?"

"And your ass."

I arched an eyebrow.

Jase smirked. "We, uh, might want to take it easy tonight."

"Good call."

"But while we're here, you're gonna skate."

"Okay." I took a deep breath. "How do I skate? And tell me again how to fall? Or, well, how to land, since I'm pretty sure I can get the falling thing right."

"Tuck and roll. Try to land on your hip or your shoulder. *Don't* catch yourself with your hands."

I nodded sharply. "Got it."

"All right. So for right now, stay on your inside edge." He pointed down at his legs, and brought his knees in just slightly.

I mirrored him, which was of course awkward and wobbly. "Do I look as awkward as I feel?"

"Do I?"

"Well, no."

"Right. You're good. I promise. And you're doing fine."

"Am I? Because I'm having second thoughts about this."

Jase smiled, which really didn't help me regain my balance. "You want your daughter to rub it in forever that she could do this and you chickened out?"

"Oh. Oh. That's cold, Jase. Real cold."

"Of course it's cold." He winked. "That's why they call it ice skating."

I groaned. "Oh my *God*."

"Come on. We'll go slow."

I arched an eyebrow. "Will we, now?" It was his turn to groan, and I laughed. "Seriously, you don't hear the innuendo?"

"Just skate."

I didn't feel stable at all on these things. Jase made it look as effortless as walking, even when he was skating backwards or going at some eye-watering high speed. Or both at the same time. Plus he could control a stick and a puck, and sometimes even get into a fistfight. While *skating*.

Me? I wobbled precariously as I pushed off and glided forward a couple of feet.

"Remember," he said, skating backwards in front of me, "keep your core taut and stand up straight. If you lean forward or back, you're going to lose your balance."

"You mean I'm not going to lose it because I'm using knives to move around on ice?"

Jase laughed. "You'll be fine. Give it another try. Keep your right skate pointing forward, and push off with your left the way I showed you. Just like—yes! Good!"

I sailed forward a few feet. "Whoa, shit, I'm moving."

"That's the idea, baby."

Little by little, he coaxed me away from being terrified to just stand on the skates, to moving… Well, not confidently, and definitely not quickly, but I made it across the rink and back. And I only fell twice, tucking and rolling of course.

“See?” Jase said as we made our way around one end of the rink. “It’s not that hard. Or terrifying.”

“Oh, it’s still terrifying. But I’m—whoa.” My balance wavered. I tried to steady myself, but then—

An arm around my waist kept me upright, and Jase and I were suddenly face to face.

“Okay, I’m—Shit!”

Jase tried to steady me, but I grabbed his other arm, and we both stumbled, and suddenly I was flat on my back on the ice with Jase partially on top of me.

We both stopped, eyes locked.

“So, um.” I cleared my throat and waggled an eyebrow. “You come here often?”

Jase laughed and rolled his eyes. He got up with way too little difficulty and offered me his hand. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good.” I sat up, and with his offered hand, carefully got back on my skates.

He looked me up and down, concern written all over his face. “You didn’t hit your head on the ice, did you?”

“Nah. I’m all right.” I brushed some snow off my ass. “We should, um…” I looked around, then met his gaze and cleared my throat. “We should be careful. If we don’t want anyone, you know…catching on.”

Jase sobered, and he glanced around the arena as he subtly put a little more space between us.

“Though, um…” I looked at him through my lashes. “For what it’s worth, I don’t care if people know. My daughter knows, and she’s the only one I didn’t want getting blindsided. I’m following your lead here.”

Jase nodded. “I know. And… I do want to be more open. Soon. But I really need to come out to my parents first.”

“I get that,” I said softly. “That’s not something I’d want my folks to hear on the news either. Just don’t rush into telling anyone on account of me, okay? We can keep this on the down-low as long as you need to.”

Jase searched my eyes, but then a smile slowly came to life. “Thanks. I’ll, um… I’ll get it together and tell them.” He took and released a deep breath. “Just gotta work up the nerve, I guess. Which is way easier said than done.” He suddenly looked more nervous than I was about skating, and he rubbed the back of his neck with a gloved hand. “Maybe I’ll talk to my brother first. Our teams play soon, and we can usually swing some downtime together before one of us has to be on the road.”

“How do you think he’ll take it?”

“I don’t know. But I think he might have some idea how our parents will.”

“Okay.” I clumsily skated closer, lifted my chin, and stole a brief kiss. “But like I said, don’t hurry for my benefit. Whenever you’re ready.”

He nodded, then gestured toward the locker room. “For the moment, though, how about we go back to my place for some of those things that nobody else needs to know about?”

I laughed. “That’s hot.” As I started toward the bench, though, I winced. “Except, uh… You might have to do the heavy lifting tonight.”

Jase flashed me a wicked grin that almost cost me my already precarious balance. “I’m pretty sure we can make it work.”

~

A SOLID WEEK LATER, I COULD NO LONGER FEEL THAT SKATING lesson in my poor, abused muscles. I still had a few aches and twinges that I was pretty sure were Jase’s fault, but they’d had nothing to do with ice skating. I could live with it, and it was hard not to stroll into the office with a smile on my face when I could feel everything he’d done to me last night.

Plus I was going to a Snow Bears game tonight. A chance to watch my man shooting around on the ice, maybe even getting into some fisticuffs? Fuck yeah.

I wasn't the only hockey fan in my office, so it was always obvious when it was game day at home. The higher ups preferred us to dress more on the "business" end of business casual, but if it was Friday and the Snow Bears were playing at home, then hockey attire was allowed. Even if it was a jersey or T-shirt representing some *other* team, like how Gail in Purchasing always wore her bright green Cutters jersey and Dave in Shipping wore his red and white Montreal jersey (though only when they were having one of their rare winning-ish seasons; he was a bit of a fair weather fan).

I had a lot of opinions about this place, and I would have sold my soul for an opportunity to jump ship and work somewhere else, but at least Hockey Fridays made it somewhat more bearable. Between those and the odd birthday potluck, it wasn't all bullshit and drudgery. *Mostly* bullshit and drudgery, but not all.

As I settled in for the day, the office was noisy, just like always, but there was an undercurrent of excitement I'd come to recognize over the years. I was used to the steady hum of conversation all around me. High cubicle walls muffled a lot of it, and over time, I'd just sort of accepted the occasional bark of laughter (looking at you, Dan in R&D) and the loud *snip-snip-snip* of someone clipping their nails at work (yeah, I know it's you, Jared in Tech Support) as background noise.

Cathy, who worked in the cubicle to my left, hadn't quite adapted even after five years. I could practically feel her vibrating with fury whenever the nail-clipping or loud-laughing started up, or whenever someone had a noisy battle with the communal printer that was forever jamming. I'd tried a few times to get our manager to let us wear headphones while we worked, under the pretense

that it was a lot easier to concentrate on numbers when we didn't have noisy distractions. He shot it down every time, though. After all, wearing headphones at work "looked unprofessional." Who the fuck was going to see it? Who the fuck cared?

Sorry, Cathy. I tried.

I felt for her, too. Ten or fifteen years ago, I'd have rolled my eyes and told her to just get used to it, but living with Dallas had taught me that sensory overload wasn't a voluntary thing. Cathy probably couldn't will herself to tune out the noise any more than Dallas could tune out strong smells or bright lights. What I wouldn't have given—and what Cathy probably wouldn't have given—for actual offices with doors. If we ever switched to an open plan arrangement, I had no doubt she'd be the first to quit, and I didn't blame her.

Today, the background noise of conversation had that excited vibe that happened when someone got their hands on a juicy piece of gossip. The whole place had felt like that for a solid month after someone found out the CFO was screwing the wives of two other senior employees. Though I mostly tuned it out, I was aware of it, and I was admittedly both curious about it and annoyed by it. Whoever was at its center probably didn't want their business whispering through the company grapevine, but… I mean, look. I was as human as anyone else. I had as much morbid curiosity as the next person. When people were spun up over something, it had to be interesting, even if I also acknowledged it was obnoxious and intrusive.

I didn't have to wait long to find out what it was.

Shortly after I came back from my morning break, someone tapped a knuckle on the side of my cubicle wall. "Hey, McKenzie, you got a minute?" Bill. He was probably annoyed that I'd kicked back a couple of his expense reports and told him that, no, he couldn't expense room service, entertainment, or his room after he'd chosen to

extend a conference trip into a vacation for him and his wife.

I turned around. “What’s up?”

“Just wondered if you’d seen this.” He gestured with an iPad, then put it on my desk and pushed it toward me. “When were you going to tell us you were hanging out with Jase Kelly?”

My heart jumped into my throat. “Uh…” I picked up the tablet.

On the screen were two photos of Jase and me. In one, we were walking out of one of the bars where we’d hung out with the team after some home games. I was tugging my jacket on and Jase was putting his wallet in his pocket, glancing back at me as I looked at him. If I remembered right, I’d just asked him if he’d parked at the stadium, and he was confirming that he had. Ooh, salacious.

The other image had been taken on a different night, since I was wearing a different jersey and Jase had on a different jacket, but it was fairly close to the same venue. In fact I was pretty sure it was just a couple of nights ago. The image showed us standing at a corner, waiting for the crosswalk light to change. Jase was in the middle of gesturing and saying something, and I was watching him, hands in my pockets as I listened. There was nothing incriminating in the photos—just two guys standing or walking close enough to be captured in the same frame. Plenty for a bored tabloid reporter to spin with some wild speculation, but it wouldn’t exactly have stood up in court.

The headline, of course, was full of that spin and speculation:

Snow Bear Jase Kelly appears with mystery man, fuels renewed speculation about sexuality.

More from the headline than the photos, my stomach turned to lead.

Really, guys? You’re really gonna go there just because you saw two guys in public? Leave him alone.

But I kept my reaction to myself and just shook my head as I handed back the tablet. “They’re really creative with those headlines, aren’t they?”

Bill took the tablet, but he watched me skeptically. “But you’ve really been going out with Jase Kelly?”

“Going out?” I laughed. “Yeah, like, going out and hanging with his teammates after games sometimes. What? You think we’re dating just because someone got a few pictures of us?”

“So…” He tilted his head. “You’re not dating him?”

“Nah, it’s nothing like that.” Every tender spot Jase had left on my body wanted to light up like some kind of visual lie detector test, and I was pretty sure my face *was* lighting up. “Remember a while back, that thing he put together for Dallas’s birthday?”

My coworker nodded.

“We’ve been talking about doing that for other kids.” I paused, then tipped my hand a tiny bit farther. “And we’re friends. But it’s nothing like…” I gestured at the article.

“Aww.” He looked as crestfallen as he sounded. “Here I was thinking we’d have Jase Kelly at this year’s Christmas party.”

I laughed halfheartedly. “Sorry?”

“Damn.”

As soon as he’d left my cubicle and I was alone, I looked up the article myself so I could actually read the text.

Appearing multiple times in public with an unknown man, Snow Bears forward Jase Kelly once again has people wondering about his sexuality and his romantic life.

The hockey player, 29, is notoriously tight-lipped about his private life. Two years ago, he was at the center of several scandalous rumors originating from his split with actress and model Lila Spaulding, who insisted during multiple interviews that her estranged boyfriend was secretly gay and wildly unfaithful. Kelly has steadfastly

refused to even acknowledge questions about his ex-girlfriend or speculation about his private life.

Many believe his silence is an admission that Spaulding was telling the truth, but much of that has fallen by the wayside since an interview last year in which he was asked why he never defended himself against rumors of homosexuality.

"It's not something to defend myself from," was his reply. "If I'm getting defensive and saying there's no way in hell I'm gay, then what am I saying to my gay fans? That being like them is some terrible thing?" He went on to add, "I don't talk about my private life because it's my private life. It's really that simple."

Kelly and the Snow Bears PR director did not respond to requests for comment.

With a disgusted noise, I closed the window. I hated how they worded the whole thing as if he were taunting reporters or "fueling speculation" just by living his life. And had Jase seen this? Someone had to have told him, assuming the reporter really had reached out for comment.

I needed to talk to him. I needed to know what he thought about it.

This wasn't a conversation I could have at my desk, though, and I didn't dare take an early lunch—I had to tread carefully when clocking in and out, considering how much time I had to take off for Dallas. But the second the clock hit twelve, I ducked out. I hadn't even made it to my car before I was calling Jase.

"Hey, what's up?" He sounded as relaxed as he ever was, so he must not have seen the article yet.

"Listen, um…" I glanced around. "There's an article floating around. Someone got pictures of us together, and they're, uh, speculating."

Jase groaned. "Son of a bitch. That must've been what Richard was calling me about earlier. Goddammit." He

paused, and I could almost see him cringing as he asked, “What did they say?”

I gave him the rundown.

He sighed. “Sounds like the usual shit. What did they say about you?”

“Not much. They don’t seem to know who I am. I can’t decide if they really don’t know, or if they’re just covering their asses for liability reasons or something.” As if I could ever afford to sue anyone, never mind a tabloid.

“Well, that’s good, I guess. I know you didn’t like the idea of the media hounding you.” He hesitated, and he sounded nervous as he asked, “How are you doing with this?”

“Um.” I thought about it, and oddly enough, I wasn’t quite as freaked out as I thought I’d be. “It’s not as bad as I thought, I guess? I mean, it’s intrusive, and I think it’s pretty gross the way they talk about you and your personal life, but…” I laughed quietly. “I mean, now that it's out there, there *are* worse things someone could say about me than I’m secretly dating you.”

Jase actually laughed, sounding relieved.

I chuckled too, but quickly sobered. “So, you’re the one with your name in lights. How do you want to play this?”

Jase was quiet for a moment. Then he exhaled hard. “Well, now that this is floating around, it’s only a matter of time before my parents see it. And start asking questions.”

I swallowed, not quite sure what to say.

“I don’t know,” he went on, “but especially if me and you are going to keep doing this, they’re going to find out sooner or later. Someone’s going to snap a picture, or…” He paused, then sighed. “I’m going to have to tell my family. It’s just a question of whether I wait until they ask questions, or I just…tell them.”

“What do you want to do?”

Jase laughed quietly. “I *want* to avoid the subject for as long as possible.”

“But given the circumstances…”

“I’m not sure yet. I think…” He was quiet for a moment, probably chewing his lip and furrowing his brow like he sometimes did. “I think I should test the water. Tell my brother and see what he thinks. Maybe he’ll have an idea of what they think.”

“Oh. That’s an idea.”

“Yeah. And I’ll be going up against Troy’s team next week. So…” Even over the phone, I heard him swallow. “So I’ll tell him then. And…we’ll see how that goes.”

“Yeah,” I whispered. “I guess we will.”

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CHAPTER 27

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JASE

"Come on, boys!" Coach clapped sharply. "Let's make sure the puck spends more time in their net tonight than ours. How about it?"

"Yes, Coach!" we all said in unison, and rose off the benches to head back in for the second period. We were holding our own tonight, especially after Kuznetsov had scored twice in the first period, but we'd been a little rough in the last two minutes. We were supposed to wait until the third period to fall apart, damn it.

We returned to the ice. The Snow Bears were playing against the Timberwolves tonight, which was my brother's team. As he and I always did when we were on the ice together, we shared a fist bump before the faceoff. Once our brotherly moment was behind us, it was game on, and neither of us had any qualms about checking each other. Our mom still hadn't forgiven us for the time we'd both done two minutes in the sin bin for fighting with each other.

"It's bad enough when one of you gets in a fight!" she'd said over Thanksgiving dinner. "I don't need to see both of you fighting like you're still in middle school."

"Dumbasses," Dad had grumbled before taking a bite of mashed potatoes.

Troy and I had both been a little sheepish, especially since the black eye I'd given him had still been fading and

I'd still had a hell of a bruise on my jaw, but we'd had to struggle not to snicker while we'd kept on eating quietly. We promised our parents that night that we'd try not to fight on the ice.

And we did…try.

Most of the time.

But he was defense and I was offense, and we were both way too competitive to give two fiery fucks about family ties when the skates were on. Tonight was no exception. Once the puck was in play, I was determined to get it into his net, and he was determined to stop me.

Maddox managed to wrestle the puck away from one of the Timberwolves. He quickly passed it to me. I was boxed in, so I passed it to Kuznetsov, who took it most of the way up the ice. By the time he was close to the goal, I'd broken loose, and I was closer, so he sent it my way again. I took the shot, but their goalie was quick, and he shot it back toward center ice.

I was about to go after it when a wall of pads and muscle slammed me against the glass.

"Nice try," Troy said a second after we made impact.

I elbowed him as we separated. "Fuck off."

Then I was chasing the puck again and didn't give a damn where my brother was.

I lost track of the puck for a second. I found it just as someone passed it, and then Kuznetsov had it, and there was only one defenseman near him. Kuznetsov was too fast for him, and the crowd roared their encouragement for the Timberwolves to catch him as he sprinted toward the goal.

Kuznetsov fired the puck at the net, and a split second later, the glass lit up red as the goal horn blared over the cheering crowd.

Though this wasn't a home game, there were very, *very* few hockey fans who weren't Kuznetsov fans, so it was no surprise when hats began raining down on the ice. A few of

them hit us as we congratulated Kuznetsov on his twelfth professional hat trick.

"Nice one!" Maddox clapped Kuznetsov's padded shoulder. "Doesn't mean you get to slack off the rest of the game, though."

Kuznetsov laughed. "Does it mean you're going to *stop* slacking off?"

"Hey. Fuck you."

Chuckling, I high-fived Kuznetsov. "Hey, we can slack off all we want. You've got this tonight!"

He rolled his eyes and muttered something in Russian, which was probably to the effect of, "Fuck you, asshole."

The hats kept coming. As I watched them rain down, my heart went wild. It was always cool when it happened, even when it was an opposing player, but after my last hat trick, the sight of all the hats took my breath away. The night I'd scored my fourth hat trick, one of the hats sailing out onto the ice had literally changed my life.

What would my life be like right now if I hadn't made all three of those goals that night? In fact I'd been pretty sure I had missed that third goal, and by all rights, I *should've* missed it. Which meant I might never have seen Dallas's note. I might never have emailed Devin. I might never have —

Okay, I didn't need to go down that mental spiral. Maybe during my post-game comedown, but not now. Kuznetsov's goals had given us a solid lead, but there was still plenty of hockey left to play. Plenty of opportunity for the team to fall apart and snatch defeat from the jaws of victory, as Coach often grumbled. I didn't need to have my own breakdown.

"Oh hey! Look at this!" Andersson's voice pulled my focus away, and I turned to see him use his stick to scoop a pair of red lace panties off the ice. "You drop something, Kuznetsov?"

"I've been looking for those!" Kuznetsov laughed and plucked the panties off the stick. "Your mom left them at

my house the other night."

We all laughed, drowning out Andersson's "that's fucked up, man" retort. Kuznetsov tossed the panties at Andersson, landing them on his shoulder. Fans roared, and I looked up to see the Jumbotron capturing the whole thing.

"Nice job." I high-fived him. "How about a few more of those?"

"Pfft." Kuznetsov rolled his eyes. "How about you get it into the net for a change?"

"For a change? Fuck you—I'm the only one who scored at all the other night."

"Uh-huh, and now it's tonight, and you haven't scored shit." He tapped his stick against my skate. "There's still time!"

As we waited for the hats to be cleared away, I caught my brother's eye again, and something twisted in my stomach. He'd texted me to congratulate me after my last hat trick, but he had no idea what that night had set into motion. And tonight… Oh God. After this game, I was going to tell him.

Fuck.

I shook myself and broke eye contact with him. I could obsess over this later. For now, I needed to play hockey. Beat his team, then blow his mind.

I can do this.

The hockey part, and the coming out part.

Oh God…

I'd had my usual nerves on the ice tonight, but there was an added layer of jitteriness this time.

Normally, I could fixate on hockey and forget everything else except the pressure of the game. Channel that pressure into playing, bust my ass for my team, then spend

half an hour or so pulling myself together after it was over. That was game night for me.

But that wasn't so easy when the reason for my nerves had been on the ice with me, and it was worse when I couldn't stop thinking about what I needed to tell him tonight.

My brother and I played against each other several times per season, and we always made a point of visiting when schedules allowed. Sometimes that meant we had time to grab lunch or dinner. Other times it was ten minutes with paper cups of arena coffee before one or both of us had to take off. The league kept players busy as hell when we were off the ice, so we took what we could get.

This time, we'd lucked out—his team was at home and had two days before they were on the road again, and mine wasn't leaving until tomorrow. So, we'd planned to meet up at his place after tonight's game. I'd crash in his guest room and meet my team at the airport in the morning.

And though I'd tried not to think about it throughout warm-ups and all three periods, even during Kuznetsov's hat trick, I hadn't been able to *stop* thinking about it.

Should I tell him tonight? Am I even going to?

Am I going to come out or chicken out?

C'mon, dude. Focus. Hockey.

I didn't usually get that queasy nervous feeling when I was meeting up with my brother. Other people, definitely, but Troy wasn't "other people."

Thanks to the bomb I was going to drop on him, though, I had that same intensely uncomfortable feeling I had during every single presser after every single game. Like there were microphones and cameras in my face and reporters crowded around me with no sense of comfort zones, and like everything I said was being scrutinized. After this many seasons, I should've been used to that—reporters were par for the course. Maybe this was as close to "used to it" as I'd ever get.

But I shouldn’t have felt this way walking into my brother’s house for drinks.

Maybe that told me everything I needed to know about what I wanted to say to him tonight. How he’d react. How he’d predict our parents would react. Fear was one thing. Having that fear confirmed by someone else was the worst.

Oblivious to me, my brother greeted me with a quick hug. As I took off my shoes, he said, “Roseanne and the girls just went for a walk. They should be back in a bit.”

“A walk?” I glanced outside. “This late?”

Troy laughed, gesturing for me to follow him into the kitchen. “Anything to make sure they sleep through the night.”

“Oh, good point.”

He took an icepack from the freezer for himself, then pulled a couple of beers from the fridge, popped the tops, and handed one to me. After we’d clinked the bottles together, we each took a pull before we headed into the living room to sit down.

“Oh, my God,” he groaned as he sank onto the sofa. “I’m getting too old for this.”

I laughed into my beer. “You said it, not me.”

“Yeah, yeah. Shut it.” He put the icepack on his knee and grimaced as he adjusted it. “Give it a couple more years, and you’ll have your share of aches and pains to bitch about.”

“Hey. I have plenty of aches and pains. I’m just not a whiner.”

He tossed a throw pillow at me, and I laughed as I batted it away.

“And for the record,” I said, “you might not be quite as sore if you hadn’t checked me like—”

“Oh, please.” He took a swallow of beer. “You check me like you did in the third period again, I will kick your ass.”

“Pfft. Keep dreaming. And besides, your dumb ass deserved it.”

He started to respond, but right then, the front door opened, and Roseanne called out, “Incoming!”

A second later, the whole house shook with thundering paws just before “the girls”—their three enormous black and white Newfoundlands—exploded into the living room.

I put my beer on a coaster in the middle of the end table, safely away from those huge tails, and leaned forward as all three dogs tried to crawl into my lap. “Hey, guys! Did you miss me? Did—Junie, no, I’m sorry, you are way too big to be a lapdog.”

She whined a little and pawed at me, shoving my knee into her sister’s face.

“What?” Troy said with theatrical hurt. “No love for Daddy?”

Immediately, Lacey climbed over her sister, over me, and right onto Troy’s lap, where she flopped down. He grunted, but patted her belly as we both dodged flailing paws and I tried not to get hit by that enormous tail.

A sharp whistle yanked all three dogs’ focus away from us and onto Roseanne, who had just walked in with three large dog biscuits in her hands. The two dogs by my feet spun around, one of them shoving the coffee table off kilter, and Lacey wriggled out of Troy’s lap with all the grace of a very large fish out of water.

My brother and I both laughed, brushing dog hair off our clothes as the girls sat obediently in a row at Roseanne’s feet. She gave them each a dog biscuit, and they all dropped onto the floor. Instantly the room was filled with the sounds of happy chomping and tails thumping on the carpet.

I picked up my beer again. “I thought you said they’d settle down as they got older.”

“Yeah, but they’re only a year and a half old.” Troy gestured at them with his own beer. “Another year, they’ll probably calm down. A little.”

We both chuckled.

“We just need to buy a place with a bigger yard so they can really run around,” Roseanne said. “That’ll at least wear them out until they grow up a bit.” She paused. “And, hey, Jase. It’s good to see you. How are you doing?”

“Good.” I smiled back. “You?”

“Not bad. Sorry I wasn’t here when you got here.” She nodded at the girls. “Had to go for my nightly drag.”

I laughed. “And people said dogs would be boring.”

“Pfft. Not these girls. Anyway, I just wanted to say hi. I’ll leave you boys to it.”

She went back into the kitchen, and Troy and I kept talking in the living room. Or, well, we tried to. Turned out that the nightly drag hadn’t been quite enough to wear out the dogs, and they’d all decided to wrestle over a toy in the middle of the living room.

So, Troy and I went out to the back deck. It was a pleasant evening—on the cooler end, but not cold—and it was much quieter out here.

Quiet enough I couldn’t ignore the way my heart kept thumping, or the way my stomach would lurch every time I looked at my brother. I’d come here to talk to him. Not just shoot the shit, but actually talk, and I didn’t want to let myself chicken out. I needed to do this.

I just…wasn’t sure how to do it without throwing up. Or having a breakdown, which my brother and his wife definitely did not need to see.

Trying to be subtle about taking some deep breaths, I leaned over my hands on the railing and stared out into the night while Troy eased himself into one of the Adirondack chairs.

“Hey.” Troy adjusted his icepack as he watched me. “You’re jumpier than usual tonight. What’s going on?”

So much for being subtle.

“I, um…” I swallowed. Was I really doing this tonight? I was doing this tonight. I’d been psyching myself up for it for days. Enough that my concentration hadn’t been so hot

on the ice earlier. If I didn't get it off my chest now, the panic over it was just going to get worse, so I might as well —

"Jase." Troy sat up. "Dude. Breathe. What's going on?"

I closed my eyes and took some breaths to calm myself down. Did I really want to feel like this for days, weeks, months before I saw my brother again?

And damn it, I needed to tell him before I could even think about telling our parents, so this had to happen sooner than later if I ever wanted to sleep again. Especially now that people with cameras were sniffing around, trying to figure out what my relationship was with Devin.

"Listen, um…" I swallowed, then pushed myself off the railing and turned to face him. "I wanted to tell you first. And then… Then I'm going to talk to Mom and Dad." That thought sent fresh panic through me, and I fought back a shudder. "I don't know when, but…" I waved a hand. "I guess it doesn't matter. Bottom line is I'm still working up the nerve to tell them, but I wanted you to know I have a boyfriend."

The words seemed to echo for miles through the quiet night.

I have a boyfriend.

I'd said it. It was out. *I* was out. Somehow I hadn't hurled over the railing yet, but there was still time for that.

I chanced a look at Troy. His eyes had widened and he'd sat up a little straighter, but so far he wasn't getting disgusted or angry. Surprised, but that was it. So far.

"So you're…" He blinked. "You're gay?"

I nodded. "Yeah." I laughed dryly, avoiding my brother's eyes. "Just, uh, little slow on the uptake, I guess."

"You're twenty-nine, and you *just* figured out you're gay."

Face burning and stomach roiling, I couldn't look at him, and I was afraid to speak, so I just nodded again.

Troy exhaled. “Holy shit, dude. I can’t imagine not knowing who I was for that long. That must have been miserable.”

This time, I did look at him, and to my surprise, his face was full of sympathy and secondhand hurt. “What?”

“Dude.” He shook his head. “I always knew something wasn’t quite right with you and the women you dated. And you must’ve known it too. Plus there was all the shit Lila said. I just…” He whistled. “That must have been confusing as fuck for you.”

Relief made me sway a little on my feet, and I casually put a sweaty hand on the railing to steady myself. “Yeah. It was. I think I… I mean, I didn’t know. But yeah, I knew something was different. I never clicked with girlfriends the way other guys seemed to, and I…” I sighed, rolling my shoulders as years of weight rolled off them. “It just took until I met Devin before I figured out exactly what was missing.”

“Wow. All these years…” He trailed off, then looked up at me. “I can’t even imagine what kind of relief that is.”

“It’s been a huge relief.” I swallowed, then sat on the edge of the other Adirondack chair. “But it’s also been stressing me the hell out.”

“Because you have to come out?”

I nodded. “My team doesn’t know, and I have no idea how they’ll take it. And then there’s Mom and Dad.”

Troy grimaced, breaking eye contact. “Yeah. That one’s gonna be fun.”

My chest tightened. “You don’t think they’ll be happy?”

“That’s the thing—I don’t know. I literally have no idea what Mom and Dad think about gay people.”

So it’s not just me.

Heart thumping, I managed to ask, “What do you think I should do?”

“I don’t know, man. I mean, sooner or later, you’re gonna have to tell them. And even if they flip out about it, it’ll

probably still be a load off because you won't be wondering anymore. The unknown is sometimes a hell of a lot scarier than the reality, even when the reality sucks."

Nodding, I gazed out at the yard. "True. But that still leaves a lot of room for that reality to *really* suck."

"I know it does." He was silent for a long moment, and so was I. Finally, with a cautious smile, he asked, "So, do I get to meet this guy at some point? At least see a picture of him or something?"

I laughed. "What? So you can be sure he's real?"

"Well, now that you mention it…"

"Shut up." I rolled my eyes as I pulled out my phone. I quickly thumbed to a selfie Devin and I had done recently, and showed it to Troy.

He took my phone and peered at the picture, and then he actually grinned. "Dude, what *is* it with you and blonds?"

I snorted. "Whatever."

"Okay, but seriously…" He handed back the phone. "You're happy with him?"

I didn't know why, but I took a minute to consider the question. It seemed like a no-brainer. Happy with Devin? Christ, yes. But being asked point blank made me really stop and think about it, and… "Yeah." I smiled as my heart fluttered. "Yeah, I really am. He's amazing." Smile fading a little, I added, "I don't know if this is going to be a long-term thing, though. I'd like it to be. I really like the guy, and I'm happy with him, but I don't know if he…"

Troy watched me.

I took a breath. "The thing is, he has a daughter. So, I don't know if he really sees me as long-term material, you know?"

Troy cocked his head. "Why not?"

"Why not?" I laughed. "Dude, you know me."

"Yeah? And I know you're great with kids." He paused. "Just, uh, maybe don't tell Mom you're dating someone

with a kid until you know for sure if you're in it for the long haul."

"Why's that?"

"Are you kidding?" He laughed and smacked my knee. "She already knows you're her only hope for a grandkid that doesn't have to be leash-trained. Do *not* let Mom get attached to a potential granddaughter and then break up with the guy."

I laughed nervously. Yeah, he did kind of have a point. Troy had declared from a young age that he was never having kids, and Roseanne was even more emphatic about it than he was. If my parents had any hope of grandkids, the pressure was on me.

So my mom would be thrilled if I told her that I was with someone who had a daughter. Mom would be immediately smitten with Dallas, and I'd break her heart if I didn't marry Dallas's dad.

Assuming, of course, she could get past the part where I was dating Dallas's dad, not her mother. Because before I told Mom about Dallas, I had to tell her about Devin. I had to tell her I was gay.

I closed my eyes and pushed out a breath through my nose. "Well, let me tell Mom about Devin first." I looked at my brother. "The fact that he has a daughter might be a non-issue, you know?"

My brother's grimace was not encouraging. "Good luck, dude. If you want me to be there, just say so."

"Thanks." I shifted my gaze toward the night sky and sighed. "I might need all the backup I can get."

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CHAPTER 28

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DEVIN

The worst part about Jase's road trips with the Snow Bears was that he was gone for days or even a couple of weeks at a time.

The best part was when he came home.

We dropped onto our backs on his mattress, both naked, sweaty, and shaking.

"Oh my God," he panted. "Are we even going to be able to walk during the off season?"

I laughed, probably sounding a little drunk. "Maybe? But I mean, we'll be able to pace ourselves. Do it more often and all that." I shifted, a few dozen aches and twinges lighting up all over my well-fucked body. "But yeah, now that I think about it, you might be on to something."

He laughed too and rolled toward me. "I gotta say, I like having you waiting in the condo for me." He kissed under my jaw. "When you're naked and ready as soon as I walk in the door?" He groaned and kissed my jaw again.

I shivered, both from his touch and from thinking about the look on his face when he'd walked in and found me naked and ready for him. The way he'd bent me over his couch and frantically, greedily fucked my ass before he'd even taken off his jacket or shoes? Mmm, I'd be reliving that in my dreams for a *while*.

The second time had been longer and lazier, and now I was so blissfully satisfied, I felt like I really was drunk.

The sex was great, but as far as I was concerned, *this* was the best part—lying together with my arm around his shoulders and his slung over my stomach. Sometimes the positions were reversed, but this was how we'd landed tonight, and I loved it.

Except tonight, he was tense. Even after we'd both come twice, and we should've been relaxing in the delicious afterglow, he wasn't quite relaxed. I couldn't put my finger on how I knew—something about him just felt off.

"Hey." I stroked his hair. "You good tonight?"

Jase hesitated. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm good."

"You sure?"

He was quiet for a moment. Then he rolled onto his back. Gazing up at the ceiling, he said nothing, but I could practically feel the gears turning in his head.

I turned onto my side, propped myself up on my elbow, and laced our fingers together, but I didn't say anything.

After a while, he took a deep breath. "So, I told my brother about me." He swallowed. "And about us."

"Oh, right, you said you were going to do that." I watched him, trying like hell to read the tension in his features. "How did that go?"

"It was… It was good. He was cool." Jase swallowed again. "Didn't really settle my nerves about telling my parents, though."

"Why's that?"

"Because he has no idea what they'll do." He absently scratched his neck, then kept his hand there and rubbed as if the muscles were getting painfully tight. "I need to tell them. I want to tell them. But I'm terrified." His voice was shaky, and the more he talked, the faster he spoke. "I have no idea what they'll say, and I… God, I want to come out so bad, but I don't want to lose my family over it, you know? But then if I don't tell them, and someone finds out and

outs me to them, or if my parents see one of those articles speculating about us, or—”

“Whoa, whoa. Slow down.” I took his trembling hand, and I was surprised to find his palm sweaty. “Jase. Take it easy.”

He closed his eyes and tried to catch his breath, but he was shaking all over now, and his breathing was rapid and shallow. Not quite hyperventilating, but getting there. He wiped his free hand over his face. “Fuck…”

“Hey. Baby, look at me.” I touched his face. “Come on. Look at me.”

He did, but he was still shaking so bad his teeth were chattering.

“Just breathe, okay?” I stroked his cheek.

He closed his eyes again and took some slower breaths. Little by little, he came down, and though was still shaking all over, his breathing had slowed to something less alarming. “Sorry,” he whispered. “I get myself worked up sometimes, and…” He rubbed the back of his neck again, wincing this time.

“Sometimes?” I studied him. “Wait, does this happen a lot?”

“No!” He shook his head quickly. “No. No, it’s… I mean, sometimes. It’s not usually this bad, but yeah. It’s a thing. Sometimes.”

I squeezed his hand. “Was this what you wanted to talk to me about a while back? When you said you wanted to talk, but then…”

He winced and rubbed his neck again. “It… Yeah. It was. And I’m… Ugh. I’m sorry you had to see it.”

“Jase, it’s nothing to be sorry about.” I gently clasped his hand and kissed his palm. “It’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

He laughed humorlessly. “Like that’ll stop me from being embarrassed about it.” He sighed. “It’s not something I like people to see, and I wanted you to know about it. Before…”

He ran his fingers through his sweat-dampened hair. “Before you actually saw it happen.”

I touched his shoulder. “So this is… This *is* normal for you?”

Avoiding my eyes, Jase nodded and wiped an unsteady hand over his sweaty face. “Yeah. Always has been.”

“Really?”

“Mmhmm. If I can stress myself out over something, I will.”

“But there’s stressing yourself out and there’s *stressing yourself out*.”

“I know. This is how I’ve always been, though.” He laughed humorlessly. “When I was a kid, I freaked out over movies. Not just horror movies, but anything that got my mind going like ‘what if that really happened?’ Like I could watch shit like *Titanic* and it was fine because when the hell was I going to be on a ship like that? Or if it happened in some fantasy world or something that didn’t look anything like earth, I was good.” He pushed out a breath and deflated a bit. “But *Red Dawn* gave me nightmares for *months*. Outbreak movies, zombie movies, shit like that?” He shook his head. “I get myself so spun up over what could happen…”

“Holy shit, Jase,” I whispered.

Cheeks coloring, he went on, “I can’t even watch those clickbait videos of hockey injuries.” He shuddered. “Made that mistake once when I’d had a few beers with my teammates. Completely fucked with my head. It was a couple of weeks before I could skate without thinking about it.”

“Wow. Have you ever talked to anyone about it?”

Jase met my gaze. “Like a shrink?”

I nodded.

“No. I’m… To be honest, I’m afraid to in case the diagnosis means I can’t play hockey. There are a few things that can disqualify a player, and…”

Chewing my lip, I studied him. Part of me wanted to gently suggest that if something like this disqualified him from playing hockey, then maybe there was a reason for that. And maybe, for the sake of his physical and mental health, he should listen to them. But I also knew hockey meant the world to him. It had been his life for as long as he could remember. If his mental health took away hockey, what would *that* do to his mental health? I knew all too well how devastating it was to be limited. I knew how much it crushed my daughter every time she added to the list of things she wanted to do, but couldn't.

And if nothing else, Jase was far too raw for that conversation tonight.

"Well, it's your call," I said softly. "If you do want to talk to someone about it, though, I totally support you. You can talk to me about it any time you want." I paused. "And for what it's worth, I've been to a therapist myself, so it's not like I'm going to judge."

Jase met my eyes with a puzzled expression. "You have? What for?"

"Stress, mostly."

"Really?"

I nodded. "When Dallas started having migraines, I had a hard time dealing. There's nothing worse for a parent than when your kid is in pain and there's nothing you can do about it. Plus I was struggling to pay for the expenses, and my shit insurance was keeping her from getting the treatment she needed. Still is, in fact. So I felt guilty about it, and I was anxious and depressed because… I mean, my kid was miserable and I felt like a failure for not being able to help her."

Jase studied me. "Did… Did the therapist help?"

"Oh yeah, he was great." I laughed bitterly. "I'd still be going to him if I could afford it, but my insurance was only letting me see him eight times a year, so…" I shrugged. "Anyway. The point is, there's no shame in seeing someone

if you need help." I brought his hand up and kissed his palm. "It's just a thought, if you want some help managing that kind of anxiety."

He nodded slowly. "Yeah, thanks. I'll, um, keep it in mind. And I'm sorry." He exhaled. "I can usually keep a grip on it, but tonight…"

"Don't apologize. Just tell me if there's some way I can help."

He met my eyes with a tired smile. "You're helping just by being here. So…thanks." He lifted his chin for a soft kiss, then came back for more. That kiss wasn't as brief as I'd expected, and I followed his lead. Maybe he didn't want to talk about it anymore. Maybe this was what he needed instead. The longer we held each other and kissed, the slower his breathing became. His hands grew steadier, and he relaxed into my embrace. He deepened the kiss, and as we sank together, his hardening cock brushed my thigh, and his arms tightened around me.

I wasn't about to ask him for more sex tonight, but if more sex was what he wanted?

Anything you need, baby.

He touched his forehead to mine. He was trembling a little now, but it felt different than it had a few minutes ago. "I, um… I don't want to stop what we're doing," he whispered. "I'm nervous as hell, but I don't want to stop."

I honestly had no idea if he meant what we were doing right now in his bed, or what we were doing as a couple. Either way, the answer was the same. Caressing his cheek, I said, "I don't want to stop either."

He grinned, and then he kissed me again, and from the way he held me close and deepened that kiss, he didn't want to talk anymore tonight. That was fine by me.

There was no telling how the future would play out.

All I knew was that tonight, we weren't stopping for anything.

~

Jase was more relaxed the next day. He didn't mention last night and neither did I—as I had in bed, I'd follow his lead, and if he didn't want to talk about it, we wouldn't. I was still concerned, and I hoped to gently nudge him toward getting some treatment, but I wanted to tread carefully on that.

In the meantime, since he was in town for a couple of days, and he had a few hours this morning, Haley met us at the practice arena to drop off Dallas for a skating lesson. She didn't mind; we shifted our custody days around all the time if one of us wanted to take Dallas to something, and Haley was thrilled that Dallas was getting skating lessons from her idol.

So around ten, after I'd introduced her to Jase, Haley took off and Jase and I went inside with Dallas.

Jase and Dallas put on their skates in the locker room. As she stood, she wobbled. "Uh. How do you walk in these things?"

"You get used to it, I promise." Jase held his arm in front of her. "Grab on to me if you need to steady yourself."

She took him up on it, and they slowly made their way toward the entrance to the rink, Jase walking effortlessly in his skates while Dallas moved uncertainly and clumsily. He stayed slow for her, though, letting her set the pace. When she wavered, he stopped, keeping his arm out so she had something to hold on to, and when she was ready, they'd start moving again.

As soon as Dallas skated out onto the ice, she immediately went from clumsy to steady. "Is it weird that it's easier to skate than it is to walk in these?"

Jase laughed. "Yeah, they're kind of weird to walk in." He skated a few feet ahead of her, then did a sharp turn to

face her, stopping on a dime. “Okay, remember what I showed you last time? About making circles?”

Dallas nodded, and she skated a slow circle in front of him.

“Good!” Jase skated backwards and encouraged her to come toward him. “Do it again, nice and slow. You’re doing great!”

They continued across the arena, mostly out of my earshot as I sat on the bench and watched. Jase would show her a turn or a stop or something, then encourage her to do the same. He’d skate backwards while he watched her, alternating between praising her and patiently guiding her through the steps.

The two of them were so much fun to watch. It was great to see Dallas getting to try something new, and they got along great as coach and student. Whenever she’d get frustrated, he’d just calmly assure her and nudge her to try it again. As they skated past me at one point, he was saying to her, “You have to remember—I have thousands of miles of skating behind me. Trust me when I say I did plenty of falling on my ass before I got here.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah. And I still fall on my ass once in a while.”

She laughed, and their voices faded out of earshot again.

I just smiled as I watched them. She was having a great time, and right now, Jase was so at ease, it was mind-blowing, especially after last night. It was reassuring, too; I was still kind of worried after seeing him have that brief anxiety attack. He’d insisted it didn’t happen often, but… did it? And did they get worse than that?

Except he clearly had *not* wanted to talk about it.

But I was worried. Of course I was. Not that he was hiding something, just that I might trigger him somehow. Maybe I was hypervigilant of things like that because of Dallas. I didn’t know. But I was definitely concerned.

For today, though, he was relaxed, and I had to say that watching Jase and Dallas on the ice still did funny things to my head. She was getting steadier on her skates, and though I was sure he'd rather be rocketing around the rink at his usual breakneck speed, he was endlessly patient with her. When she needed to, he let her hold on to his arm. When she skated with her hands free, he stayed close enough that he could reach her if she fell.

There were moments when she still looked at him like she was completely starstruck, but more and more, he seemed to be becoming a real person to her. Not just her hockey idol or even Dad's boyfriend, but a down-to-earth nice guy who was teaching her something she'd always wanted to learn. They got along like I'd always hoped she and my partner would get along, which made my heart flutter.

It made me kind of nervous, too. There was no telling what the future held for Jase and me as a couple. If things didn't work out between us, then I just hoped we could keep them amicable. I always hoped for that anyway, but this time, I definitely had my fingers crossed because I didn't want a breakup between us to cost my daughter her friend *or* her hockey hero. I wasn't quite sure how to make sure the chips fell that way if we split up, but I supposed I'd cross that bridge if and when we came to it.

In the middle of the rink, Jase skated a tight figure eight, then gestured for Dallas to do the same. She started to push off, but then hesitated. She wavered on her skates.

My heart jumped into my throat just like it always did when she fell or even wobbled.

Then Jase suddenly skated toward her and grabbed her upper arms a second before she lost her balance. He crouched a little, and when he looked at her, the concern in his expression sent a jolt of panic through me. So did the telltale way she rubbed her right eye.

“Oh shit,” I murmured. I wanted to hurry across the ice, but I was in sneakers, and I wouldn’t do her any good if I busted my ass.

As I watched helplessly, Jase and Dallas exchanged a few words. Then he rose, wrapped his arm around her shoulders, and let her lean against him as they skated toward the bench.

I already had a pill packet out and open before they’d even cleared the ice. “How bad is it?”

“Not bad yet.” She grimaced as she sat down on the bench. “Just started.”

“Auras?”

She nodded.

“Okay. Okay, we’ll get out of here.” I handed Dallas her pill and water bottle, and as she took the pill, I looked at Jase. “I need to get her home. The meds will pretty much knock her out, and she needs to be someplace dark and quiet in case they don’t work.”

“Sure. Yeah.” He nodded. “Let me go grab her shoes out of the locker room.”

“Thanks.”

He clomped down the chute, and I crouched in front of Dallas to start unlacing her skates for her. When he came back, he put both his shoes and hers on the bench, sat beside her, and started unlacing one of his skates. “You know, my place is closer than yours. Why don’t we just take her there?”

I blinked. “What?”

“It’s fifteen minutes instead of forty.”

“But it’s… I mean…” I glanced at her, then at him. As much as I didn’t want to impose, a fifteen-minute drive would be a hell of a lot less miserable for her. “Are you sure?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

I hated to be an imposition, but damn, I couldn’t argue if it meant getting her someplace sooner than later, so I just

murmured, “Thanks. You’re the best.”

“I’m sorry.” Dallas sounded on the verge of tears as I kept unlacing her skates. “I was really having fun.”

“It’s okay.” Jase sat beside her, and as he started unlacing his other skate, and he flashed a quick smile. “We’ll do it again when you’re feeling better.”

She smiled a little, but then closed her eyes and covered them with her hands.

“Jase,” I said, “there’s a plastic glasses case in her bag.” I nodded toward it as I gently tugged Dallas’s skate free. “Could you grab it?”

He unzipped her small backpack, quickly found the purple case, and handed it to me.

I took out the sunglasses. “Here, kiddo.”

Dallas put them on, but she probably still kept her eyes closed. The auras nauseated her sometimes. At least this way, if she needed to open her eyes while we walked out to the car, the overhead light would be tempered a little.

Dallas’s meds kicked in fast, and by the time everyone had changed into street shoes and we’d started heading for the car, she was tired and unsteady on her feet. She had to lean heavily on me as we walked. I helped her into the backseat of Jase’s Prius, and he drove us out of the parking lot. He was a pretty chill driver anyway, but he was extra careful with stops, starts, and turns, and he kept shooting worried glances in the rearview.

“Does she need anything?” he asked, barely whispering.

“Just someplace dark and quiet. A cool cloth over her eyes helps too.”

He nodded. “Okay. I’ll grab one as soon as we get home.”

“Thanks.”

Neither of us said much the rest of the way to Jase’s condo. As he parked, I was extra grateful he’d suggested coming here instead of going home—Dallas was starting to

grimace and make tiny, plaintive sounds that I knew meant the pain was kicking in.

As quickly as we could while both the migraine and drugs were taking hold, we hurried up to Jase's condo. She leaned on him on the way down the hall and into the condo, so I went to get the cool cloth rather than jostle her.

When I came back into the room with a damp dishtowel, Dallas was leaning against him on the couch, eyes closed with his arm around her shoulders.

He looked up at me. "My bed is a lot more comfortable than the couch, and the bedroom has blackout curtains. Why don't we let her sleep in there?"

"Okay. Dallas, you good with that?"

She nodded and started to stand, but wavered and grabbed on to him for support. "Sorry, sorry," she slurred.

Jase kept a hand on her shoulder. "It's okay." I was about to suggest letting her crash on the couch after all, but he leaned down. "Here. Put your arms around my neck."

She did, and once she was holding on, he carefully scooped her up like she weighed nothing.

"You good?" he asked as she rested her head against his shoulder.

She made a quiet sound that he must have taken as a yes, and then he headed down the hall. I followed, my chest tight with worry for my daughter, though my stomach had a few butterflies over how sweet Jase and Dallas looked like this. If she weren't so miserable, I would absolutely have been swooning over how gentle and careful he was with her. Instead, I was just grateful for it.

In the bedroom, which was lit only by the light coming in from the hallway, Jase eased her down. Once she was settled, I put the cool cloth over her eyes and forehead.

"Does she need a blanket or anything?" Jase whispered.

I shook my head. "No. She gets too hot." I touched Dallas's shoulder. "You comfortable, kiddo?"

Dallas murmured something that resembled a yes.

“Okay, we’re going to let you relax.” I squeezed her hand. “We’ll be in the living room. Right down the hall.”

“’kay.”

I watched her for a moment. It killed me every time a migraine knocked her off her feet. I hated seeing her in this much pain, and I hated the powerlessness. I could give her meds. Put her in a cool, quiet room with a damp cloth over her eyes. Try my level best to keep her away from triggers. But once the migraine started, there really wasn’t much I could do except let her ride it out.

Exhaling, I met Jase’s eyes and nodded toward the door.

Then, after one more plaintive glance at my daughter, we left the bedroom so she could rest.

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CHAPTER 29

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JASE

Devin left the bedroom door open a crack, and we kept the hallway dark. In the living room, I turned on a lamp that would keep the room dim in case Dallas needed to come out here, but still gave us enough light to see each other.

I sat beside him, my arm slung along the back of the couch. “How long does it usually take her to ride it out?”

“Could be a couple of hours. Could last all night.” Shaking his head, Devin sighed. “It depends on whether the meds did their thing this time, and…” He waved a hand. “Sometimes there’s just no telling. It, um… It could be rough for hours.”

“Wow. Poor kid.”

“I know, right?” I sighed. “I’m so sorry about all this.”

“What? Don’t be sorry.” I glanced toward the hallway. “I just feel so bad for her.”

Devin grimaced as if it physically hurt him when his kid was in that much pain. “Me too.”

“And no one knows why she gets them like this?”

Shaking his head, Devin sighed, deflating against the back of the couch. “Her pediatrician just blows it off as one of those things that happens. I mean, yeah, some kids get migraines, but I don’t know anyone whose kids get them as often or as bad as Dallas does.”

“But the doctor won’t look into it?”

“Not with much enthusiasm, no. She referred her to a neurologist, but he barely took Dallas seriously at all. The guy was such an asshole to Dallas and her mom that when they came back for her follow-up, Dallas ironically ended up with a migraine afterward because of the stress.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah. We never got anywhere with that doctor because he acted like she was just exaggerating. No one her age could handle migraines that severe, that often.” He laughed bitterly. “Like she has a choice, you know?”

“You can’t get a second opinion?”

“Not with my health insurance,” Devin grumbled.

“*That’s* the hold-up? Insurance?”

He nodded slowly.

Somehow it was both surprising and…not. It had been a long time since I’d had to worry about an HMO dictating who I could and couldn’t see, or whether I could afford to see a specialist or have a test done, but I remembered.

“I get it,” I whispered. “My dad’s insurance wasn’t great, and my mom tore her hair out for years about not being able to take us to the doctor for things.”

Devin met my gaze. “Really?”

“Oh yeah.” I laughed dryly. “I’ve got good coverage through the league, but I wasn’t always a pro hockey player.”

“True. True, I guess you weren’t.” He rubbed his temples and sighed. “This is, um… This is part of life with me and Dallas. It’s our reality. Unless someone comes up with some miracle treatment, it’s going to be this way as long as she lives at home, and God knows if or when she’ll be able to move out when she’s old enough to work.” He lifted his head and turned to me, looking a hundred times more exhausted than he had earlier. “If this is all too much for you, I’ll understand.”

“Too—” I blinked. “What? No!” I put my hand over his. “It sucks that she’s that miserable, and it’s obviously hard

for you and her mom, but it's not going to scare me away."

He studied me like he wasn't sure if he believed me.

"Come on." I squeezed his hand. "I've known about her migraines since day one, and I'm still here."

"Okay, but this is the first time you've had a front row seat."

"She's the miserable one. I'm just glad I could help."

That brought a faint smile to his lips, and he leaned in for a soft kiss. "Thank you again, by the way. There's only so much any of us can do, but every little bit helps. I really appreciate it."

"Don't mention it. And I wish I could stick around in case there's more I can do, but…" I checked my phone and frowned. "I need to head to the arena soon."

"Oh, shit." Devin glanced at his own phone. "I totally forgot you had a game. I…" He looked back at the hallway, then at me. "How soon do you need to go?"

"In the next half hour or so, I think."

He looked toward the hallway, brow furrowed, and I swore I could hear his thoughts.

"Stay here." I touched his knee. "Don't make her move while she's not feeling well."

Devin turned to me. "Are you serious? You… You don't mind us staying here while you're at the game?"

"Of course not. I'm not going to ask you to wake her up and put her in the car now." I gestured toward the bedroom. "Stay as long as she needs to."

His whole body seemed to relax all at once. "Thank you." He cupped my cheek and met my eyes in the dim light. "For everything you've done for us today."

"You're welcome." I kissed him softly, and we let it go on for a moment. As we pulled apart, I whispered, "Do you want me to bring anything when I come back? Food, or…?"

Releasing me, Devin shook his head. "Nah. I'll order something for delivery if I can find something that won't

bother her. And, shit, I still need to let Haley know what's going on."

"Okay. Well, if you think of anything, shoot me a text. I'll probably be back around eleven or so."

As predicted, it was almost eleven when I let myself in. The living room was still lit only by the lamp on the end table, and Devin sat on the couch with Dallas lying beside him, her head on his lap as he stroked her hair. The afghan I kept draped over the back of the couch was wrapped around her, partly covering her face.

"Hey," I whispered, carefully shutting the door behind me. "How is she?"

Devin wobbled his hand in the air. "It's been a rough night."

"I bet."

Dallas looked up at me, her face puffy and her eyes barely open. "Jase?"

"Hey." I unbuttoned my suit jacked and smiled as I crouched beside her. "Feeling any better?"

"Eh." She moistened her lips. "Did you win?"

I laughed softly and nodded. "Yeah. We won."

That made her smile weakly. "Did you score?"

"No, but I got two assists."

"Good." Her eyes fluttered closed again.

Devin stroked her hair. "You okay here for a minute while Jase and I go in the kitchen?"

She nodded.

He carefully got up, letting her rest under the afghan and against a stack of throw pillows. Once she was as comfortable as she could probably get, we moved into the kitchen. There, he wrapped his arms around my waist. We shared a brief kiss, and then he rested his head against my

shoulder, and we just stood there for a long moment, arms around each other in the middle of the kitchen. I was wrung out after tonight's game, but I suspected it was a small miracle that he was still upright at all.

Stroking his hair, I murmured, "How are you holding up?"

He groaned into my shoulder, then straightened and met my gaze. "I'll be okay once she is."

"Is she at least getting better?"

"I think it's plateaued, so it's hopefully not going to get worse." He sighed. "She just has to ride it out from here." Grimacing, he added, "It could be a few more hours at least."

"Okay. Well." I motioned toward the living room. "She can sleep wherever she's comfortable. The bedroom will stay dark in the morning, but the living room gets a lot of light, so she might better off—"

"Wait, you're okay with her staying here? All night? Don't you have to fly out tomorrow morning?"

"Well, yeah." I stared at him. "But I'm not going to kick you guys out while she's still feeling bad."

"But we're—"

"Devin." I touched his face and looked right in his eyes. "Your daughter's in pain. You're obviously exhausted. I'd be a serious asshole if I booted the two of you out."

He bit his lip, obviously still unconvinced.

I barreled on, "I have to leave fairly early, but you have a key so you can lock up on your way out, and you know the code for the parking garage. You're good."

Slowly, the tension melted out of his features, and he leaned in again to rest his head on my shoulder. "Thank you. You're the best."

Stroking his hair, I kissed his temple. "Whatever you need." After a moment, I asked, "How do you want to do this? Sleeping arrangements for us with her in the house?"

Devin lifted his head again. “Well, I don’t have it in me to do anything, so…”

“No, no, of course not. I meant would you rather I took the couch so she can have my bedroom and you can take the guest room?”

“What? No.” He shook his head and ran his hands up my back. “I’m not kicking you out of your own bed. Just stay in the guest room with me.”

“But won’t that be weird for you? Or for her? If we’re sharing a room?”

Devin shook his head. “Nah. She knows we’re dating, and I’ve had boyfriends and girlfriends stay over sometimes. It’ll be fine.”

“Oh. Okay. And her mom is good with her staying?”

“Definitely.” He checked his phone. “I should run back to my place and get something for her to wear tomorrow, though. And for me.”

“Okay. I can stay here with her.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. I’m in for the night anyway, and I’m not going to leave her alone while she’s feeling like this.” I gestured down at myself. “Do you mind if I change out of this first?”

A little grin played at his lips. “But I like how you look in a suit.”

I chuckled and kissed him. “Yeah, but it’s not that comfortable to lounge around in.”

“Fair enough. Go change.”

I went into the bedroom and quickly traded my suit for some sweats and an old T-shirt. When I came back out, Devin was pulling on his jacket.

“You sure you don’t mind me taking off for a bit?” he asked. “It could be like one o’clock before I get back.”

“It’s fine.” I slid my hand under his jacket and rested it on his waist. “Don’t sweat it.”

“Are you sure you’re…” He swallowed, searching my eyes. “I mean, after last night…”

I shuddered at the memory of both the mild freak-out and the fact that he’d seen it, and I shook my head. “I’m good. Trust me, if I couldn’t handle anything, I’d never last as a hockey player.”

“I know, I know, I just…” He sighed. “I’m sorry, I’m not trying to imply—”

“You’re trying to take care of your daughter, and you want to be sure I can do it.” I clasped his hand between both of mine and kissed him softly. “I’m good.”

He studied me for a moment, but must have decided I looked and sounded convincing, because he nodded, then kissed me softly. “Thank you so much.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“I’ll be back as soon as I can.” He started to go, but paused, a hint of a grimace on his face. “Full disclosure, she sometimes gets sick at this stage. She’s already thrown up a couple of times. Just, um, don’t be alarmed if it happens.”

I nodded. “Good to know.”

“Okay. I’ll…” He gestured at the door. “I’ll be back ASAP.”

He left, and I took a seat on the recliner. Dallas was asleep on the couch, and as I watched her, my heart beat faster than it had during tonight’s game. For the next hour and a half or so, she was my responsibility. What if she *did* get sick? What if she got worse? Devin would only be a phone call away, but *God, please don’t let her get worse on my watch*.

I could feel a freak-out tugging at the very edges of my mind, but I fought it back the same way I did when my team was counting on me. Right now, Devin and Dallas needed me to have my shit together.

While Dallas slept, I went into the kitchen (which was close, so I’d hear if she started moving around or needed

help) and poured myself some ice water. I was kind of hungry, though I'd eaten right after the game. But Devin had said strong smells made things worse for Dallas. I had no idea what she was sensitive to, and didn't want to pester him while he was driving, so I stuck with water for now.

When I returned to the living room, Dallas had rolled onto her back and had her hand over her eyes.

"Hey," I said, keeping my voice soft. "The lights okay?" I'd only left a single light on in the kitchen, just so I could move around without crashing into something.

"Yeah." She sighed. "It's good. Thanks."

"All right." I wanted to ask if the bedroom would be more comfortable, or if she needed anything, but if sounds bothered her, then talking probably wouldn't help. Speaking as quietly as I could, I said, "Just say so if you need anything."

She nodded silently.

I sat back, resting my water glass on my leg. She was more or less okay for now. As okay as she could be under the circumstances. If Devin were here, he probably wouldn't do anything differently. Would he? What *could* he do? He'd said there was nothing to be done except give her meds, keep things dark and quiet, and let things run their course. If she got sick…well, I'd done my share of partying, so I could handle that. If she just needed to lie on the couch in total silence, I could handle that too.

This must have been hard as hell for Devin. I'd seen the worry on his face the moment I'd started guiding Dallas off the ice earlier, and when I'd come home from the game, he'd been wiped.

There had to be something I could do. If not for her, for him?

But hell if I could figure out what.

I WAS STARTING TO NOD OFF ABOUT THE TIME DEVIN CAME BACK. I'd tried like hell to stay awake in case Dallas needed someone, but holy shit, I was exhausted.

I'd left the front door unlocked, so when Devin came back around one, he walked right in. He had a backpack on his shoulder and a shopping bag in his hand.

"Hey," he whispered. "How did it go?"

"Good. Good." I gestured at Dallas, who was sound asleep on the couch. "She's been racked out since you left."

He gazed at her, and managed a smile. "That's always a good sign. Maybe the worst is over."

"Let's hope."

He put the bags down beside the couch, then motioned toward the kitchen. I got up and followed him so we could talk without disturbing her.

In the kitchen, he faced me. "How are you holding up? You look tired."

"I am. But I didn't want to fall asleep until you came back."

Oh God, that smile. I felt like crap right now, but if that was the price for him to smile like that after the day he'd had? I could deal.

"Thank you," he whispered. "I knew she was in good hands."

I didn't point out that I hadn't actually had to do anything, thank Christ.

Instead, I gently tugged him closer. "Listen, is there anything I can do? I mean, I know there's nothing either of us can do to make her migraines magically go away, but what about you?"

"What about me?"

"Like, is there something I can do to make things easier for you? To help you out? Anything?"

"Jase." He wrapped his arms around my neck and kissed me softly. "You let us crash at your place instead of going home. You've done more than you think."

“Still, I—”

He shut me up with a gentle kiss. “You’re good.”

“Okay. Let me know if there’s anything I can do.”

Devin smiled. “I will. Now why don’t we get some sleep? I think we’re all about ready to crash.”

“Good idea.” I glanced toward the living room. “She really will be more comfortable in the bedroom once the sun comes up, but I don’t want to wake her up.”

“Better to wake her up now than let the sun do it.”

“You, um…” I hesitated.

He met my gaze, eyebrows up. “Hmm?”

I swallowed. “You want me to carry her again? So she doesn’t have to get up?”

He glanced toward her, then me again. “You don’t mind? I would, but I haven’t been able to since she was eight or nine.”

“I don’t mind at all.”

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CHAPTER 30

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DEVIN

Dallas didn't feel great the next day—hangovers sucked—but she was functional enough to go to school. I felt bad sending her when she wasn't a hundred percent, but the school's attendance office was on my ass, so neither of us had much choice. I dropped her off a few minutes late for first period, and got myself to work just late enough to get a growly look from my boss. He didn't actually say anything, but I had no doubt it would be added to the *reasons I really wish I could fire your ass* list.

I kept adding to that list all day, too, because I couldn't focus. My head was stuck on last night. On yesterday, really.

So now Jase had seen one of Dallas's migraines play out. He'd witnessed how quickly an outing could be derailed and turned into long hours of migraine mitigation with little to no warning.

How did he feel about that? What did he think of the whole thing? What did he think about us now?

Damn. This was the part that usually sent people packing. Haley and I had differing views about how to approach it from this point. She thought I should just let it ride and let a partner figure out if they wanted to stick around. Maybe I'd just been dumped too many times, but I

was more inclined to have an uncomfortable conversation and see where things landed.

“You know that’s a good way to push someone out the door who might stick around if you give them time, right?” Haley had said after another one of my exes had bailed.

“If that conversation is enough to shove them out,” I’d reasoned then and still reasoned now, *“then they weren’t going to stay.”*

“But maybe giving them an ultimatum isn’t the way to go.”

“It’s not an ultimatum. I just need them to know what they’re up against, and if they’re not interested… well…”

“Tell me how that isn’t an ultimatum.”

Haley and I agreed on most things, but this was one place we’d never seen eye to eye. She thought I was too aggressive about it. I thought she didn’t know what she was talking about since she’d already been married to Nick once Dallas’s symptoms had shown up. This wasn’t something she’d ever had to deal with except as a spectator.

And maybe she was right. Maybe it *was* an ultimatum. But after enough people had slammed the door in my face, I didn’t apologize for coming out and asking the next one if they were going to do the same. At least then I could catch the door before it hit my face.

The question was *when* to have that conversation. It was a tough line to walk—having it too soon could scare off someone who wasn’t into me enough to consider any kind of long term investment, and putting it off too long could scare off someone I’d already invested in more than I should have. I was kind of damned if I did, damned if I didn’t, but this was the reality of my situation.

And after last night, I should have been feeling better about the odds of this playing out the way I wanted. Jase had been a saint for her and for me. He’d had a taste of our

reality, and it hadn't scared him out the door yet. That had to be a good sign. Right?

I wished. The fact was, I knew better. No one had ever bolted in the middle of a migraine, but once the dust had settled and they'd had time to think about it, that was when second thoughts happened. If the first didn't chase them out the door, it wouldn't be much longer. Even if he stayed for a while, what happened during the off season when he wasn't gone more often than not? Once he saw both the severity *and* frequency? Because that was the part that most people couldn't handle.

Aw, fuck.

Like it or not, Jase and I needed to talk. I needed us to look this thing in the eye, acknowledge it, and figure out what it meant for us…even if that meant letting him go like so many people before him.

As luck would have it, his current road trip was one where he was so busy between traveling, playing hockey, and trying to sleep, we barely had a chance to text, never mind FaceTime. The first time I saw his face after he'd left that morning in his condo (aside from on TV when he was playing) was when he came to my apartment after I got off work.

He greeted me with a kiss, and we sat on the couch to talk and hang out. Tony joined us, getting in Jase's lap instead of mine, the furry little traitor.

As Jase absently petted Tony, he met my gaze, his forehead creased. "By the way, how is Dallas doing? Seemed like the other night was really rough."

"Oh, she's good now. It was a rough night, but her mom texted me the next day and said she was tired, but eating, which is always a good sign. By the time she went to bed, she was feeling normal again."

"Oh Good." He exhaled. "I was worried about her."

"Me too." I hesitated, but I'd been down this road so many times, I knew there was no point in dragging it out.

Now that he'd seen what Dallas went through, the conversation couldn't be avoided anymore.

So, I took a deep breath and looked in his eyes. "Listen, the other day? That's not an uncommon thing."

"I know it isn't."

"It happens a lot. A *lot*, a lot." I pushed out a breath, my shoulders sinking under an invisible but very familiar weight. "The poor kid can't catch a break."

"Jesus. That seriously sucks."

"It does. And the reason I'm bringing this up…" I laced our fingers together. "I just… I need to make sure you know what you're getting into. That you've thought about it. Dallas and I—we're a package deal, and her migraines run the show sometimes."

Jase nodded. "I know. I knew it was serious when you told me she couldn't come to hockey games because of it. All the things that could have triggered her…" He exhaled. "I don't know how she handles it."

"Nobody gave her a choice," I whispered.

He winced. "Man, that sucks. But I mean… I get it. If your kid is sick, you have to take care of her."

"Right, but my kid is sick a lot more often than most people's. And dating me means, well…" I swallowed. Haley *had* told me I should be less aggressive about this, and maybe she was right, but I didn't want to sugarcoat it too much either. "It means interrupted ice skating lessons. Vacations getting canceled at the last minute. Or right in the middle of it. You haven't had to see it up close and personal because you're not here all the time, but once the off season is here, and if we're doing this for a long time…" I dropped my gaze. "I love my kid, and I don't want to make it sound like she's just her migraines and nothing more. She's not. But this is our life. And if you and I are together, then to some extent…" I hesitated, then met his eyes again. "To some extent, it'll be *our* life. Cancellations, interruptions, slamming the brakes on anything and

everything you can imagine. Fact is, a lot of perfectly good and well-meaning people can't handle that. Or don't want to. And I would rather know where you stand sooner than later before anyone gets more invested than we already are."

Jase studied me, his expression unreadable. My heart pounded, because this was usually the part where the truth sank in, and a person realized my reality wasn't one they could cope with.

"I need you to decide if you can handle this," I said, barely whispering "If you can't, then…" I could almost feel Haley's hand on my shoulder and hear her telling me not to push any harder. Silently, I watched Jase as I fought the urge to say more.

Please, please don't go. I haven't felt this way for someone in ages.

If there's one person out there who won't take off over this, please let it be you.

After a moment, he said, "Dating *me* means being at the mercy of the regular season schedule and seeing me on FaceTime more than in person for most of the year. *And* being with someone who's still figuring out who the hell he is." He half-shrugged. "I'd be kind of a dick if I said there's something wrong with you having a daughter who's got medical problems she didn't ask for."

I blinked. "Really?"

"Well, yeah. I want to be with you."

Oh, God, I wanted to hold on to that. To just believe it and accept it and have the Sword of Damocles *gone*.

But I'd been down this road too many times to naively believe this was the end of it.

It was a struggle, but I didn't look away as I said, "I know you do. And I do, too. But I want you to think about the reality of what it means to be with me. What you'll be giving up personally to stay with me. It doesn't mean you're an asshole. If that's not what you signed up for, then—"

“I don’t think it’s what you or Dallas signed up for either.”

“But we can’t opt out. If you need to—”

“Devin.” He shook his head. “I’m not going anywhere. I want to be with you.” He touched his forehead to mine and stroked my cheek, and when he spoke again, he was barely whispering. “I don’t know if it’s too soon for this, but I love you.”

My heart melted, and I ran my fingers through his hair. “It’s not too soon.” I lifted my chin to brush my lips across his. “I love you too.”

Then he kissed me for real, and there was no doubt in my mind that he meant what he’d said. He loved me. He wasn’t going anywhere. By some miracle, he knew what we were up against, and he was holding me even tighter.

I was dizzy with relief and sheer exhilaration, and oh my God, I would never in a million years get tired of the way this man kissed. Especially now. Tonight, it felt…so good… to let myself get completely into this without that nagging worry in the back of my mind.

I wasn’t naïve enough to believe he couldn’t still turn around and decide this was too much for him, or that he wouldn’t ever find another reason to decide I wasn’t right for him, but we’d made it past *that* conversation. The one that had chewed up and spit out more than one promising relationship.

And I felt better about this than I had in a long time.

A thump got my attention, and I broke the kiss to see Tony stalking away from the couch.

Jase watched him go. “Think we offended him?”

“Probably.” I hooked a finger under his chin and turned him back toward me. “But now he’s out of the way.”

“Mmm, yes, he is.” Jase took full advantage, wrapping his arms around me as we shifted so I was on my back on the couch. It was a little small for the two of us, but

whatever. We could've made the trunk of his Prius work if we had to.

Between kisses, he murmured, "Should we go into the bedroom?"

"Mmm, I think we're good right here." I slid my hands into his back pockets. "Pretty sure I can give you head on the couch just as good as I can in there."

Jase groaned, leaning down to kiss my neck. "Fuck, please tell me you're serious."

"You think I'd joke about that?"

"No, but—oh, God." He moaned as I pushed a hand between us to rub his thickening erection through his pants. His lips found mine again, and fuck, I loved the way he rutted into my palm as he kissed me hard, moaning every now and then. When he broke the kiss with a gasp, he said, "Didn't you say something about giving me head?"

I laughed. "Take off your pants and let me get up, and you're damn right I'll give you head."

Didn't need any arm-twisting for that. Or, well, for the taking off his pants part. We started making out again, because of course we did, and…fine. I could work with this.

So could he, apparently.

Stripping out of our clothes was awkward and clumsy when we were tangled up on the couch, but whatever. We fumbled, we laughed, we nearly toppled onto the floor, and little by little, we got rid of all the layers between us. Before long, we were skin on skin, and laughing turned into gasping between kisses as we made out. I ended up on my back again, Jase's narrow hips between my thighs, and he rocked just enough to create some friction between us, which almost killed my ability to kiss because holy fuck, I could not possibly be more turned on. In fact if he kept it up, I was sure we'd both come, and I had promised him a blowjob.

"Sit up," I panted. "Let me suck you off."

Jase shuddered hard, and he got up. We shifted around so he was sitting up, and I nudged the coffee table aside so I could kneel between his parted thighs.

Oh, my God. I'd blown him plenty of times since we'd started dating, but this view? Fuck, yes. Sitting between two powerful thighs, watching his six-pack abs contract as I stroked his dick, gazing up at his kiss-swollen lips and lust-filled eyes? Mmhmm, this would be on my mind the next time I jerked off. No doubt.

I ran my tongue around the head of his cock, and the groan he released made my body hot all over. Going down on him was one of my favorite things ever, especially since he just enjoyed it. Maybe he'd come, maybe he wouldn't, but he was totally onboard to sit back and enjoy the ride without trying to rush.

As I licked my way down the shaft of his cock, I glanced up again, and he was teasing his nipple with his fingers as he watched me through heavy-lidded eyes. So. *Hot*.

The more I licked and stroked him, the faster his breathing became. He swore and gasped, and his cock grew even harder as the faint salt of pre-cum hinted that he was almost there.

"Fuck," he moaned breathlessly, digging his fingers into my shoulder. "I'm gonna come. Oh, yeah, that's it. That's… Fuck…" He shivered and gasped, and I added a little twist to my strokes, and he came with a shout, nearly levitating off the couch as he unloaded on my tongue.

I sat back on my heels and gazed up at him. Now *that* was hot—Jase, sitting back on my couch, naked and breathing hard as he came down from his orgasm.

"Oh my God," he murmured, blinking his eyes a few times. When he focused on me, he grinned and beckoned to me. I got up, straddled him, and he pulled me down into a kiss, not shying away at all from the taste of cum in my mouth. Barely breaking the kiss, he said, "You are *so* good at that."

I grinned against his lips, and just kissed him again.

His arms tightened around me. All at once, we were moving, and suddenly I was the one sitting against the couch, and he grinned down at me. “Now it’s my turn.”

I licked my lips. “D-don’t let me stop you.”

He kissed me again, lightly this time, and knelt between my legs. I squirmed, aroused beyond belief just from the sight of him and the anticipation, and then those full lips were around my dick, and—

“Jesus, baby…” I raked my fingers through his hair, careful not to push his head down or hold him in place. Holy *fuuuck*, this man’s mouth. When I said Jase loved to enjoy the ride, I didn’t just mean he loved it when he was on the receiving end. Especially now that he’d lost some of his nervousness about sucking cock, he was more than happy to give me a long, languid blowjob. Nothing in the world beat getting head from someone who enjoyed giving it, and oh my God, Jase enjoyed giving it. Slow strokes. Teasing every inch with his lips and tongue. The occasional low groan to let me know that, yes, he really did enjoy this. It was unhurried, and sexy, and decadent, and I was in heaven.

“Oh, yeah…”

Jase moaned, and that subtle vibration had my back arching and my toes curling as I tried to find my breath.

“Baby, you’re gonna make me come.”

Another moan. He stroked faster with his hand, gripping tighter, and I grabbed his shoulder and the armrest as he took me higher.

“Jase… Oh God…” I let go of his hair so he could move if he wanted to, and I let my head fall back against the couch. “Seriously, I’m gonna come. If you don’t want me to… Fuck, baby…” He gave me even more, and nothing about the way he licked and pumped my dick said he had a problem with me coming in his mouth.

I forced my eyes to stay open and stared down at him, struggling to catch my breath as I watched the most gorgeous man alive going to town on my cock. “Fuck, yeah. Keep… Do it just like that. Just like that. Oh, yeah.”

Right then, his eyes flicked up and met mine, and every fantasy I’d ever had—about Jase Kelly the hockey star and about Jase the man I’d fallen in love with—suddenly paled in comparison to the lust gleaming in those beautiful eyes as he went down on me, and that was all I could take. With a gasp, I arched off the couch, my hips trying to buck as much as they could in this position, and he groaned around my dick as I came in his eager mouth. He kept stroking me until I stuttered, “S-stop,” and then he backed off and gazed up at me, looking exceptionally pleased with himself.

“Holy fuck,” I murmured.

Jase grinned. He joined me on the couch, and I kissed him. The taste of my own cum in someone else’s mouth had never been a huge turn-on for me (not a turn-off, just not a big turn-on either), but something about kissing Jase after he’d sucked me off for the first time made my spine tingle. Maybe because it was the he’d never sucked off anyone else, and there was something hot about that being mine. I didn’t know. Did it matter? I felt amazing, and Jase’s kiss just made the post-orgasmic bliss that much better.

We shifted a little, and finally sank onto the cushions. Jase was on his back, and he wrapped his arms around me as I settled on top of him. For a long time, we kissed lazily just like that, warm skin against warm skin, his hands sliding all over me. Sex with him just never got old.

Jase broke away and started to say something, but then he looked past me, and he stiffened.

“What?” I glanced over my shoulder and realized what had caught his eye—the poster of him. Facing him again, I sheepishly said, “Oh. Yeah. I, uh, forgot that was…”

But he just laughed, shaking his head. “It’s just a little surreal, I guess.” He lifted his chin to kiss me softly. “But I

don’t mind.”

“Well, that’s good. Because I really don’t know how to explain to Dallas if I need to move it.”

Jase laughed, and my heart went all melty again. He was just so fucking cute, and that smile could light up a stadium.

But he wasn’t in a stadium tonight. He was here with me, cuddled up together on a couch that barely fit the two of us, and I could have watched him smile all night long.

As his humor faded, he met my gaze and ran his hands up my back. “You don’t have to move it.”

“Good. But maybe we’ll go in the bedroom next time.”

“Eh.” He shrugged. “That would’ve meant stopping and moving, and…” He shook his head. “I didn’t want to wait.”

“Not even with…” I gestured over my shoulder.

“I can cope. Promise.”

“Just tell me if you can’t.”

“Can do.” He pulled me down and kissed me again, long and tender this time. “I love you, Devin.”

“I love you too.” I brushed my lips across his. “How do you feel about moving to the bedroom now, though?”

Another smile. “I think we can do that.”

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CHAPTER 31

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JASE

I COULDN'T GET THAT NIGHT OUT OF MY HEAD, AND NOT IN A GOOD way. It had been a week, and ever since I'd left Devin's apartment that morning, I hadn't been able to relax. I could barely think.

That part wasn't quite true. I could think—just not about the things I *needed* to think about, like driving. Or navigating an airport. Or playing hockey. Right now, I was supposed to be putting on my gear for the team's morning skate, but I couldn't relax. I couldn't… Fuck, I couldn't even breathe. My mind was going a million miles a minute the way it did when I was freaking out between playoff games, mentally buckling under the pressure and flailing because there was nothing I could do to change the outcome until I actually hit the ice.

Except hockey had nothing to do with why I couldn't calm down today. Even a playoff game had never had me this fucked up.

Pacing alone in my team's familiar locker room, trying to ignore the tingling in my shaking hands and the pressure in my chest—not a heart attack, this was *not* a heart attack—I begged my stupid brain to pull itself together. The rest of the team had already geared up and gone out for the morning skate, but I was in here, trying to talk myself off the fucking ceiling.

Just give it a rest, I told myself over and over. *Focus on the game. Not on Devin. The game.*

But it didn't work. Everything Devin and I had talked about kept rocketing around in my head. I'd known from day one that Dallas and Devin were a package deal, and about her health problems. Those were literally the reason we'd met in the first place.

But something about our conversation had been messing me up, and today it had me this close to freaking out. Again. Like…badly. Especially since I couldn't stop thinking about the fact that I was meeting up with Devin after the game. It was our first home game after being on the road, and we were going out with the team for drinks, and I'd be facing him with all this shit on my mind, and—

Fuck. Was it going to be like this all the time now? Me losing my shit before a game, even more than I had the last couple of games because this time I'd see Devin? And what happened when I saw Devin in the crowd with his brother?

And what if Devin and I got serious? Like, really serious?

More serious than telling him you love him?

Oh God.

My stomach lurched, and I struggled to take a deep breath. Or any breath at all. I couldn't breathe, and I couldn't calm down, and goddammit, not this shit again. I'd already lost it twice in the last week, and I was not doing it again. I had a game tonight, for God's sake.

I managed to get to the bathroom and splash some water on my face and in my hair. Sometimes that helped. Sometimes it didn't. This time…it didn't.

Gripping the edges of the sink with slick, wet hands, I tried to pull myself together, but it wasn't working. My heart kept going faster and faster, and I couldn't get enough air.

A pre-game breakdown was never good for anyone, but I refused to let my team down. I refused to scratch over something like this unless it was so bad I couldn't pick

myself up off the floor, and that was a rare thing. I knew me—I'd freak out twice as much next time because of whatever had set off the attack *and* because I was afraid I wouldn't be able to play. If that happened enough times, my team was going to get fed up. So was my coach.

No, I had to pull it together. Not just play tonight, but play extra hard so no one had any reason to doubt me. Especially so I didn't have any reason to doubt me.

No pressure or anything.

Oh God. Breathe. Come on. Air. Why isn't there enough air?

I was simultaneously mortified and relieved to hear the sound of skates on the hard floor. I hated being seen like this, but Christ, I needed that lifeline, and I prayed through the chaos in my head that whoever was coming in *was* a lifeline, not just someone walking in to find me losing my mind.

"Kelly?" Maddox. Thank God.

I closed my eyes and exhaled. "In here."

The clomping came closer. "Hey. You all right?"

I pushed out a ragged breath, my heart pounding so hard I barely heard myself say, "I don't know."

A hand materialized on my shoulder. "Come on. Let's grab a bench."

I nodded, and with Maddox's help, made it into the locker room and sat down on a bench. I put my head between my knees, and I tried to just breathe while he kept a reassuring hand on my shoulder. Familiar. Comforting. This was how he and Kuznetsov always helped me down. It meant everything would be okay. I just needed to concentrate on him and follow his lead, same way I did every time.

Except it wasn't working. I couldn't pull myself together. My heart kept beating harder. All the oxygen in the room stayed just beyond my reach. I tried to speak, but ran out of breath before I'd made a sound.

“Kelly. Kelly, come on. Look at me.”

I made myself sit up, and Maddox gripped my shoulders firmly. “Look right at me, and just breathe, man.” He inhaled deeply through his nose, then exhaled through his mouth. “Come on. Just breathe. Breathe like this.” He did it again, and I focused on how he was breathing. “Don’t worry about anything else.”

I concentrated hard on him. On his breathing. On *my* breathing. On not passing out.

With his help, I’d usually start coming down steadily. But I wasn’t. This was bad. This was real. It was always real, but it was…like *real* this time.

“C’mon,” he said, the faintest hint of worry in his voice. “Kelly, just breathe. You’re good.”

No. No, I was not good. What the fuck was happening? I tried to focus on breathing. I tried not to let myself think about what had sent me into the spiral in the first place. Just breathing. Breathing in. Breathing out. Breathing in. Breathing out.

“Kelly?”

Damn it, I still couldn’t breathe. The room was spinning.

Fuck. I can’t breathe.

“Kelly? Hey. Look at me.”

I blinked a few times, but my eyes wouldn’t focus. Tried again.

“Kelly? Dude, come on. Look at me.”

Where the fuck was I? What was going on?

“Hey! I need a hand in here!”

~

“That’s it.” The voice sounded far away. “Just breathe nice and slow.”

What the fuck was over my face? And why was everything cold? The air rushing at my nose and mouth.

Whatever I was lying on. Everything was cold, damn it.

"Jason?" I had no idea who that was. "Jason, can you hear me?"

I opened my eyes, but winced away from the bright light in front of them. Cautiously this time, I opened them again.

Above me were three faces. One I immediately recognized as Coach. The second took a few beats, but finally connected as Doc Williams, the team doctor. The third was someone I'd never seen before, but the uniform gave him away.

I closed my eyes again and sighed against the oxygen rushing in through the mask over my face. The paramedics. They'd called the goddamned paramedics.

"His heart rate and blood pressure have leveled out," a woman said.

She and Doc Williams exchanged a few words. There was some medical jargon in there, but my head was still swimming, so I didn't catch much of it. The gist seemed to be that I wasn't having a heart attack and that I was stable. That was good to know.

"I still think we should take him in and monitor him," the other EMT said. "Just to be absolutely sure."

My first instinct was to rip off the mask and tell them no way because I had a game tonight. I needed to be getting focused and gearing up.

But I knew the drill. Someone had called 911 or grabbed the on-site EMTs, and there was no way in hell Coach was letting me out on the ice tonight. He and Doc would probably bench me for at least the next couple of games. League policy. Club policy. Liability.

And truth be told, even if they asked my opinion on the subject, I wasn't going out on the ice tonight. I was exhausted. Every muscle in my body ached. My chest hurt. My head didn't hurt, so whatever had happened, I hadn't fallen. My brain was trashed, but not from a concussion. Yay?

I didn’t know what was wrong with me, but I wasn’t playing hockey tonight.

“Let’s see if you can sit up.” The male paramedic held my arm and put a hand under my shoulder. With his help and Doc’s, I eased upright. I was still kind of dizzy, and the motion of sitting up took more work than it should have, but the worst was over. I’d sure be wrung out for the rest of the night, though.

With some more help, I got up and sat on a bench. Christ, I was still sweating. I definitely needed a shower tonight. I sat on the bench for a few minutes, and finally convinced the medics I didn’t need the oxygen mask anymore. Though once I took it off, I decided the tradeoff wasn’t so great—instead of cold air, now I was getting the full bouquet of a locker room. Oh God. I was still in the locker room. I’d been lying on the locker room floor. I shuddered. Definitely needed a shower ASAP.

My head was clearing, and the oxygen machine’s white noise wasn’t drowning out other sounds anymore, and I realized the locker room was mostly quiet and empty. Coach had probably ordered everyone to stay out on the ice for now. That, or the morning skate wasn’t over yet. How the hell long had I been in Freakoutland, anyway? Maybe I didn’t want to know.

“You want us to call anyone?” Coach asked.

“No. I’m good.” I patted my pockets and found my phone. “I’ll give my mom a heads up so she doesn’t worry when I don’t play tonight.”

And Devin. Shit! Devin’s supposed to be here. We’re supposed to—

The machine tracking my pulse started beeping faster, and I closed my eyes and took a few slow breaths.

“You okay?” The woman sounded concerned. “Your pulse just accelerated.”

“I’m good. I’m…” I swallowed. “I’ll be fine.”

Physically, I'd be okay, and I knew going to the hospital was just a precaution and a liability thing.

But I wasn't good.

I wasn't fine.

And I had no idea what to do about it.

RICHARD FED THE MEDIA THE USUAL LINE WHEN A PLAYER scratched at the last minute: food poisoning. I'd been admitted to the hospital for observation, was recovering comfortably, and was expected to return to the ice after missing no more than two or three games.

Devin sent several worried texts, and I assured him I'd be fine. I let the food poisoning line stand for now. I was too exhausted and embarrassed to tell him the truth. When I saw him in person, then I could tip my hand, but for now I blamed it on some bad sushi and included a few unhappy emoji faces. I felt guilty for lying to him, but at least this way I didn't have to delicately explain why I needed to be alone tonight.

The hospital released me right around the time the game ended. I was tempted to go meet my buddies at the bar for our post-road-trip drinks, but I couldn't handle people tonight. Especially not my teammates. They must have been pissed at me for letting them down like that.

So I took a cab home, and settled onto my couch to figure out what the hell I was supposed to do next. And what the hell had happened. And what any of it meant.

My phone buzzed with a text. I groaned—I didn't have the brain cells to deal with anyone, never mind type anything out, but I read it anyway.

Maddox had sent, *Came to check on you*.

Came to—wait, he was here?

Right then, the elevator dinged. He wasn't…

I rose slowly—I was still a little wobbly—and even without his skates on, I knew those heavy footfalls coming down the hall. I headed for the door, and I opened it just before he would've knocked.

"Hey." He looked me up and down. "You're still standing. That's a good sign, right?"

"Yeah. Yeah, it's good. Come on in. You want a beer or something?"

"Nah, I gotta drive after this." We sat down on my couch, and he studied me. "How are you doing? What the hell happened?"

I slung my arm across the back of the couch and sighed. "The doctor said it was…" I laughed bitterly as heat rushed into my face. "They said it was a panic attack."

He didn't look surprised. "Yeah? But you're good now?"

I nodded slowly and croaked, "I think so. Thanks."

"So, what's going on, man?" His voice was full of concern. "You've been kind of shaky lately, and this is like the third time something like this has happened this week."

"It hasn't been this bad," I murmured.

"I know. It was super bad today, but the last few days…" He tilted his head. "What's up?"

I swallowed the acid in my throat. I hated that my teammates had ever seen me break down like this, never mind as often as it had been happening lately. I was grateful they didn't give me shit for it, and that Maddox and Kuznetsov knew how to talk me through it, but it was embarrassing as hell.

I raked my fingers through my hair. "Fuck…"

Maddox watched me for a moment, then quietly asked, "Is this about that dude you're dating?"

My head snapped up, which didn't help the lingering dizziness at all. "Huh?"

He smiled, and he gave my knee a firm pat. "Come on. The press probably buys all that shit about you guys being friends, but we're your team."

I swallowed. “So you guys… You all…”

“Yeah, we know.” He shrugged. “None of us are going to say shit to anyone about it. And we didn’t say anything to you because we didn’t know if you wanted us to know.”

“But… I mean, how much have you guys talked about this?”

“Dude, we’re not a bunch of gossipy kids.”

“No, you’re hockey players,” I said dryly. “That’s worse sometimes.”

“Okay, fine,” he conceded. “But it hasn’t been anything like… I mean, it was more like somebody asked once ‘Is Kelly dating that guy whose daughter can’t come to games?’ and then a few days later someone was like ‘oh hey, yeah, I think he is.’” Maddox shrugged again. “It’s nothing more than that.”

I nodded slowly, shifting my attention to the cushion between us. I believed him—hockey players could be the worst gossips, but they kept it in-house even if it was something seriously scandalous. And this crew was pretty cool with gay guys, so me having a boyfriend wouldn’t be much of a scandal. I didn’t know why I’d worked myself up over them finding out about us, except that I worked myself up over everything, so why should that be an exception?

“What’s the deal with him?” Maddox asked. “You worried about the press finding out or something?”

I sighed, rubbing my hand over my face. “The press. My parents.”

“Your folks don’t know?”

I shook my head.

“Like, about you and him? Or about you?”

“About me,” I whispered. “I told my brother a while ago, and he’s worried about how they’ll react, so *that* helped. I mean, they’ve never said anything homophobic, but they’ve never said anything supportive either, so I have no idea.”

Maddox whistled. “Shit. That sounds terrifying.”

“Right? So I’m freaked out about that, and then Devin and me… We had a talk last time we were in town. Right before we flew out.” I swallowed. “I guess he’s had a lot of partners bail because his daughter’s got some medical issues, and he basically said that dating him means the package deal. He has joint custody, so she’s with him a lot, and if I can’t deal, then…” I gestured over my shoulder with my thumb. “Might as well get out.”

“He said that?”

“Not exactly. That’s… That’s just how it sounded, I guess.”

“What exactly did he say?”

I took a deep breath and ran him through as much of the conversation as I could pull out of my rattled brain. When I was done, I sighed. “I adore his daughter, but man, I am terrified of dating someone with a kid. Like, I can teach her to skate and put together games so she can watch some hockey, but…” I met my teammate’s eyes. “I can barely take care of myself. Just *thinking* about trying to be a boyfriend *and* whatever he wants me to be for his kid…” I gestured at myself and shakily said, “For fuck’s sake, look at me.”

Maddox’s brow pinched. “So this was all… You’re freaking out about maybe being a stepdad?”

Face burning, I nodded. “I know it sounds fucking stupid, but—”

“Naw, I get it.”

“You do?”

“Are you kidding?” He laughed humorlessly. “You don’t think it scared the shit out of me, getting the whole preinstalled family? And I was already a dad when I met Crystal. She was scared as hell about becoming Dylan’s stepmom, too.”

I swallowed, stomach somersaulting. I’d known at the time how freaked out Maddox had been over going from a single dad of one to a married father of four, but hearing

him confirm it now did nothing to calm my nerves. “That’s what’s freaking me out too. His daughter is great, but I mean… The longer I’m with him, the more I want to be, but the more it freaks me the fuck out. I don’t even have my feet under me as a gay man, you know? Or just…at all. I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing. I barely know who the fuck I am, and I—”

“Whoa, whoa.” Maddox touched my shoulder again. “Breathe, dude.”

I did, and realized I’d almost started hyperventilating again. Leaning forward, I kneaded my forehead with the heels of both hands. As my heart rate and breathing came down *again*, I muttered, “God, what is *wrong* with me?” Fuck, I was exhausted from my own brain doing this to me. Lowering my hands, I looked at Maddox. “What the hell does it mean when thinking about my relationship fucks me up like this?”

“Maybe it means you and your guy need to talk some things through.”

I swallowed. “What am I supposed to say, though? There isn’t a lot of middle ground here. He and his kid… I can’t have one without the other, you know?”

“I know. I get that. He has to take care of his kid, but remember, you gotta take care of you. Look out for number one.” He paused, and his voice was soft as he added, “I know you’re into this dude. But man, this is stressing you out so bad, you ended up in the *hospital* today. If this thing you guys are doing is freaking you out this much, maybe tapping the brakes isn’t a bad idea.”

I shook my head. “No, I don’t want to do that. I’m…” I couldn’t say out loud that I loved Devin. I didn’t know why. When did anything in my head ever make sense? “I want to be with him.”

“I didn’t say ditch him. Just tap the brakes, you know? Slow things down a bit and make sure you’re both on the

same page. It isn't like you have to elope with him next week, right?"

"True."

"So talk to him, slow things down, and…" He shrugged. "See how that goes. If that's not cool with him, then… I mean, maybe then you have your answer."

I cringed inwardly. Maddox was right. I just needed to slow things down, and Devin and I needed to talk about everything. Being a boyfriend intimidated me enough—I wasn't ready to be a stepdad.

Except dating Devin was a package deal. And he'd made it clear that the package deal part was non-negotiable. He'd been emphatic about it, and I didn't blame him after other people had obviously bailed. Fact was, it was either Devin and Dallas, or nothing.

Which made sense. He was looking out for his daughter, and he'd obviously been burned a few times in the past by people who couldn't or wouldn't commit to more than being his boyfriend.

So if I couldn't make that commitment…

I exhaled. That didn't really leave many options, did it?

"You good?" Maddox asked.

No. I was so far from good I didn't know how to explain it. Instead, I forced a smile. "Yeah, man. Good talk." I bumped his fist. "Thanks for checking on me."

"Any time."

Now I needed to get some sleep, get in touch with Devin, and figure out where the hell we went from here.

IF THERE WAS ONE THING I WAS GETTING SICK AND TIRED OF doing, it was deep breathing.

This morning, after fighting exhaustion and restlessness all night, I'd reached out to Devin, and tonight, he was

coming over after work. All day long, I'd had that same edgy feeling that had segued into yesterday's panic attack, and all goddamned day long, I'd been telling myself to breathe and doing everything I could to keep myself together.

I wanted to see him. I always wanted to see him. But oh God, I was nervous as hell. Maddox and I had talked a lot about what I should do and say, and about how if Devin were a reasonable guy—which he absolutely was—he'd understand. He knew how hard being a single parent was. Wouldn't he also understand how hard it was to approach being a stepparent? Maddox had had the same worries and reservations, and so had his wife, but they'd made it work. Why couldn't we?

Besides the part where I'm on a hair trigger for a panic attack just from thinking about it?

Deep breaths. Deeeeep breaths. More stupid deep breaths.

Tonight, we'd talk. That was all we could do, right? Just lay it all out, talk about it, and decide how to move forward. It wasn't like one of us had cheated or done something terrible. We were just finding our footing and figuring out what we were doing. It made me nervous to think about because everything made me nervous, but I could do this. I'd be a lot less stressed once I did it. Hopefully.

But as I let Devin into the condo, my stomach dropped into my feet. Even as he greeted me with a gentle kiss, everything suddenly felt all wrong.

One look at him, and holy shit, my heart was doing what it had been doing in the locker room.

"How are you feeling?" He asked, brow creased with concern. "Sounds like yesterday was miserable."

Oh, it was, but not for the reasons you think.

"Yeah. It was, uh, rough. I'm…" Telling him I was better now was a lie. I'd already lied to him about having food poisoning in the first place, and I couldn't do it right to his

face. Somehow, I found just enough air to whisper. “Today’s been better.” Technically true. I hadn’t wound up on a locker room floor with paramedics hovering over me.

We sat down on the couch like we usually did when he came over, but I couldn’t settle. I was a wreck. Everything Maddox had said to me came crashing in along with the heart-thumping panic that had dropped me in the locker room, and all the arguments I’d made to myself about why I wanted to stay with Devin no matter what… Those were all drowned out behind the blood pounding in my ears. How was I supposed to navigate a relationship when just looking at my boyfriend made me start sweating? I didn’t want to walk away, but I was going to give myself a fucking heart attack. A real one, not one of those freak-outs where I thought I was having one.

“Devin, I…” Fuck, I couldn’t look him in the eye.

“Hmm?” He squeezed my hand and furrowed his brow, which turned my conscience to acid. “You all right? What’s going on?”

“Look, I…” I ran a hand through my hair and shivered when I realized it was damp. Or maybe that was my fingers. Either way, I was sweating already, and just noticing that made the shaking worse and made my heart pump even harder and—

“Jase.” Devin touched my chin and lifted it so we were looking at each other. “Is everything okay?”

Okay? Wasn’t it painfully obviously that I was nowhere near okay? Oh God, I could not wind up in the ER today. Not again.

I moistened my lips. “I need… I need to level with you about something.”

“Oh. Um. Okay?”

“Remember when I had that breakdown? When we were talking about me coming out to my brother?”

He nodded slowly.

“I’ve, um…” I exhaled, then blurted out, “I’ve had three of those in the last week. And yesterday, it wasn’t food poisoning. That’s just a canned line they feed the press.”

Devin’s eyes were instantly huge. “What was it?”

Shame pushed acid up my throat as I croaked, “A panic attack.”

“A panic—” He gripped my hand tighter. “Jesus, what happened?”

“It’s… It’s this.” I swallowed hard. “Us.”

He blinked. “Us?”

“Everything we talked about… About me and Dallas, and…”

He straightened. “Is that what this is about? Dallas?”

“Not her, just…” I took a deep breath. Tried to, anyway. “I’ve been thinking about what we talked about, and… I just don’t know if I can handle it. I don’t know if I’m ready for it. Just trying to get my head around it put me the ER and has me on the bench for tomorrow night’s game.” My voice wavered and my eyes stung as I dropped my gaze and whispered, “I’m sorry. I don’t think I can—I *can’t* do this.”

“What? Jase.” The shakiness in his voice hit me hard. “Let’s talk about this. We don’t have to just—”

“Look, I wish we could make this work, but I’m spending so damn much time losing sleep over it and freaking out over it, I…” I shook my head. “I can’t even function right now. I literally can’t do my job.”

“But we can work through it,” he whispered, a note of desperation in his voice. “We don’t have to call it quits if—”

“I do,” I said, my voice shaking. “I love you, Devin, but this… What we’re doing… What it all means…” Fuck, I couldn’t breathe again. My chest was tight, blood pounded in my ears, and my heart was going so fast—Jesus, I really couldn’t breathe. “I thought I could do it, but the more I think about it… I can’t. I barely know who I am. I don’t know how to be a boyfriend, never mind anything close to a

stepdad, and I'm… I just can't do it. It's too much. I'm sorry. It's just too damn much."

He didn't say anything for a while. Or maybe it was only a few seconds, but it felt like forever because I was falling the fuck apart and trying *not* to fall the fuck apart and *goddammit, Devin, say something*.

Finally, he said, "Jase."

I took a deep breath, and though it took a ton of effort, I lifted my head and met his gaze. His expression was completely serious, and goddamn, the tears in his eyes stung more than the ones in mine. His jaw worked, but I couldn't tell if it was because he was pissed or because he had to work that hard to keep the tears back.

Devin swallowed. "Do you want me to go?"

I didn't. It was the last thing I wanted. But if I was going to hold on to whatever sanity I still had, I couldn't do that with him here.

So like the coward I was, I broke eye contact, and I nodded.

He was still for a moment. I was afraid he might argue. Even more afraid he wouldn't, and that he'd just leave because I'd probably hurt him and pissed him off. Why the hell would he want to stay?

When he finally got up, he didn't say a word. He probably didn't even look at me.

He just…left.

As soon as the door shut behind him, I exhaled.

And then, alone in my silent condo, I cried, because I had no idea if I'd done the right thing or if I'd just made a huge mistake.

I just knew it fucking hurt.

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CHAPTER 32

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DEVIN

Why had I even bothered hoping Jase would be different from everyone else I'd dated?

This was the part where they always turned tail and ran, and I was an idiot for thinking it wouldn't play out that way this time too.

In the elevator on the way down from Jase's condo, I forced back tears of both hurt and anger. I'd had breakups before. I'd had disastrous splits—the kind where I wondered how we'd lasted as long as we had, and the kind that came out of left field and knocked me on my ass. I'd had the quieter ones that hurt because neither of us wanted to break up, but we'd sadly come to the conclusion that it was inevitable.

Out of all those breakups, I didn't remember hurting as much as I did now.

Maybe because this was still fresh. Or because… I mean, how was I supposed to argue with a man on the verge of an actual panic attack after he'd told me that just being with me had driven him into an attack so bad he'd landed in the hospital? Clearly the prospect of being my boyfriend and just imagining dealing with Dallas long term was stressful enough to warrant a 911 call. Or maybe… I had no idea. I just knew that my chest physically hurt and I had to fight hard against the tears that wanted to break free.

No. Not here. Especially not when the elevator let me off and I was heading for my car. I really didn't need someone to snatch a picture of me losing my shit in the parking garage below Jase's condo. We'd managed to dodge a lot of media attention throughout this relationship. They'd sniffed around, but had mostly lost interest when Jase and Richard had casually told them we were just friends. We didn't go out in public enough to get busted, so they'd gotten bored with us.

Please, God, can we keep that up now that it's over?

Somehow, I kept myself together long enough to drive across town to my apartment. I made it into the elevator, up to my floor, and by some miracle, unlocked the door without dropping my keys.

Numbly, I walked into my apartment, tossed my wallet and keys on the table beside the door, and headed for the kitchen for… I didn't know. A drink, maybe. Something.

As I crossed the living room, my gaze went to the walls of hockey memorabilia, and my heart stopped.

Staring at the poster of Jase, I swore into the silence. It wasn't the sight of him that made that sick feeling rise in my throat right then. It wasn't the reminder that posters and pictures and pucks were all I had left of what I'd thought was something real.

That poster belonged to Dallas.

So did a number of Jase Kelly jerseys.

"Aw, fuck," I muttered into the stillness and dropped onto the couch. What was I supposed to do? Tell my daughter that Jase had left because he couldn't cope with the prospect of being a stepparent? Because the medical roller coaster was too much for him? She'd think I was blaming her. She'd think she was the reason Jase—her sports idol and the man who'd become her friend—had vanished from our lives. That it was her fault—not mine or some bad sushi's—that Jase had been hospitalized and benched. No way in hell was I doing that to her.

At least she wasn’t here tonight. I had a few days before I had to try to put on a stoic face and pretend I wasn’t dying inside.

A quiet chirp announced that Tony had come into the room, and a second later, he hopped up into my lap. For as much as he could be an asshole—he *was* a cat—he purred and kneaded on my leg and looked in my eyes.

“Hey, buddy.” I scratched his rump and tried not to cry just because I really, really didn’t want to. But damn it, now I was remembering the way Tony had cuddled with Jase. How much Jase had melted for him, and… Fuck. Was there anything left that didn’t remind me of him?

Sighing, I wrapped my arms around my cat, pulled him against my chest, and buried my face in his fur. Sometimes he’d struggle and pull away when I did that, but he just leaned into me and purred.

I glanced up again. It would probably hurt like hell for a while whenever I looked at that full-size poster of Jase on my living room wall, but there was no way I was taking it down. I refused to tarnish Dallas’s love of hockey or the way she felt about Jase.

That was the same reason I didn’t take down the framed photo beside the TV. That shot of the three of us in front of the Snow Bears backdrop the night Dallas and I had first met Jase. Back when her larger than life hero had hugged her. Before I’d fallen for him. Before being with us had scared him so bad he’d—

I sighed.

Damn it. We should have let it end that night at the stadium. We should have walked away with the photos, the souvenirs, and the memories.

Some part of me wanted to believe this had been inevitable no matter what. That, single dad or not, I’d never had a shot with him. Had I really thought Jase Kelly would want to be with me for the long haul?

Except I hadn’t been dating Jase Kelly the hockey star who was light years out of my league. I’d been dating Jase Kelly the man. The man who was sweet, and vulnerable, and caring, and so, so human. We’d just been two guys in a relationship, not a starstruck fan fooling himself into thinking he was good enough.

It would have been so much easier to let him go if I could just feel stupid for believing I’d had a shot at someone that high above me. It would be easier if things had really been that superficial.

But they hadn’t been.

Jase was a real person, this thing between us had been real, my feelings for him were real, and the way it hurt to let it all go was some real goddamned pain. I wanted to hate him for leaving, especially leaving for the same reason so many people had left before him, but I just hurt.

Fighting back tears, I buried my face in my cat’s soft, black fur.

And though I’d never say it out loud to Dallas, I wished I’d never thrown that note into the arena.

I wished we’d never met Jase.

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CHAPTER 33

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JASE

What the hell did I do? Damn it, I let him go? What was I thinking?

The empty space beside me in my bed that morning was like a huge blaring announcement reminding me that Devin was gone. That I'd sent him away. That I'd… God, had I really broken up with him?

Yeah. I had. And the worst part was that I didn't know how I could walk it back. I wanted to be with Devin. I loved him. I adored him and his daughter, and I wanted them in my life.

The problem was that I couldn't handle it. Whatever the hell was messed up with my psyche couldn't take the pressure. Had I really thought it could? I could lose my mind for *days* if I wasn't absolutely positive I'd remembered to lock my car in the secure airport parking lot. Keeping this relationship going? Being what Devin and Dallas needed? Being an out gay dude? God, just thinking about it had my heart racing all over again.

I wanted to be with him. I wanted—

My phone vibrated, nearly startling me out of bed.

And fuck my life—it was a text from Coach.

I need to see you in my office.

Gee, thanks, Coach. Because that text first thing in the morning totally wasn't going to tip me into panic attack

territory again. Because I wasn't already a goddamned wreck over letting go of Devin last night.

But I supposed after the other day, he was within his rights to want to talk to me.

The day I'd been taken to the hospital was the first time I'd heard someone describe what happened as a panic attack, and it was the first time it had gotten that bad in front of anyone other than Maddox or Kuznetsov, but it wasn't the first time it had happened. Now it had required paramedics. Now it had scratched me from a game only hours before puck drop.

Now it couldn't be ignored.

My career is over, isn't it? I swallowed hard on my way down the hall toward Coach's office. *They're going to release me from my contract.*

Maybe it was just as well. It wasn't like I was going to suddenly be on an even keel because I'd broken up with Devin. I was devastated over that, and my concentration would be shot for God knew how long, and let's face it—this had started long, *long* before Devin had ever tossed that hat into the arena.

Awesome. I could lose my career and the man I loved in the space of twenty-four hours. All because my head couldn't handle anything without short-circuiting.

At Coach's door, I paused to steel myself. And maybe to collect some of those emotions that kept stubbornly trying to surface. The last thing I needed to do was break down crying in the head coach's office.

When I was sure—sort of—that I had it together, I knocked.

"Come in."

I closed my eyes. *Okay. Here goes.*

Then I opened my eyes, opened the door, and stepped inside. "You, um, wanted to see me?"

Coach sat back in his chair. "Sut the door and have a seat." I did, and he went on, "I think we need to talk about

what happened the other day."

A nauseating wave of panic rushed through me. Swallowing hard, I nodded. "Okay."

He studied me for a moment, then took a breath. "How are you feeling now?"

"Better," I said quietly. "It was a shitty night, but after I slept it off…" *Then I broke up with my boyfriend, and now I feel even worse because I miss him, but my fucking brain can't handle the stress of*—I cleared my throat and sat back, trying to look relaxed. "It was just a bad night."

"Uh-huh. Well, I'm glad to see you're doing better, but…" He drummed his fingers on the desk. "Son, Doc Williams and I are concerned that you're dealing with some untreated and out-of-control anxiety. And it's obviously getting worse."

Mute, I nodded. I had no idea what to say, and I hoped he just got to the part where they were releasing me and got it over with.

He folded his hands. "I'm benching you for the next four games."

"The next—" I blinked, simultaneously relieved it was only four games, not permanent, but also ready to insist I didn't need to sit out that long. "Coach, I'll be fine."

"I know you will," he said with a nod. "But I want you to take a few days to get your head together, and I want you to get evaluated by a professional."

"So why not just release me?" I shrugged with a lot more dismissiveness than I felt. "If you don't think I can play, then—"

"Whoa, whoa, slow down there, kid." He put up a hand. "No one's talking about releasing you."

"They're… They're not?"

"No." He shook his head, but then narrowed his eyes. "Is that why you never came to anyone about this? Why you always downplayed it?"

I shifted a little under his scrutiny. “I… You knew about that?”

“Kelly.” He laughed dryly. “You really think shit like that gets past me? Of course I knew. But I didn’t realize how bad it was until we had to have EMTs pick you up off the locker room floor.”

I shuddered, avoiding his gaze as embarrassment twisted my stomach.

“There are people who can help you, you know.” He leaned forward. “And the league has a whole list of those people. All you have to do is make an appointment and go see someone.”

“It won’t disqualify me from playing?”

“Anxiety? Pfft. Of course not. If they give you a prescription, you’ll want to run it by Doc Williams, but you wouldn’t be the first player getting treated for this.”

He said it so casually. So matter-of-factly. But it hit me right in the chest.

I wouldn’t be the first player getting treated for anxiety.

It wouldn’t spell the end of my hockey career.

And…*there was treatment?* I didn’t have to live like this?

I blew out a breath. “Who do I call?”

Coach smiled and reached into his desk drawer. “Here’s a list of approved psychologists and psychiatrists in this area.” He handed me a stapled list someone had printed off the computer. “And this is some information Williams wanted you to look at. About anxiety and panic attacks.” He added a stack of pamphlets.

I gave them a cursory glance, but tucked them under the list of numbers. I wasn’t quite ready for that yet. “Okay. Okay, great. I’ll look through it as soon as I leave. But… I can still play hockey, right? Even while I’m figuring out…” I gestured with the list and pamphlets.

Coach nodded. “I still want you to take off the next four games, and then let Williams look you over and double

check your heart and everything are good before you play. Just a precaution."

I nodded and didn't crack any jokes about covering anyone's ass. "Okay. Sure. Sounds good."

"Let us know if you need anything." His brow pinched, and he reminded me of my dad right then. "Don't try to weather this on your own, okay? You're part of a team. You need help, ask for it."

A lump was rising in my throat, so I just nodded and managed, "Thanks, Coach."

He dismissed me, and when I was alone in the hallway, I looked down at everything he'd given me. Heart thumping, I thumbed through the pamphlets.

Chronic Anxiety: Coping Methods & Pharmaceutical Treatments.

Why is everything a crisis? Anxiety & Daily Life.

Is this just stress, or is it anxiety?

One definitely caught my attention:

Panic Attacks: What they are and what you can do.

With more than a little trepidation, I opened that last one and skimmed to the part that listed what a panic attack felt like.

Feeling like you've lost control or you're going crazy. Certain you're dying. Racing heart. Sweating. Detachment from reality and/or from yourself. Shaking. Tingling. Chest pain. Nausea. Choking. Dizziness. Can't breathe. Feeling excessively hot or cold.

Whoa. That was… That was exactly what it was like. Not just when my teammates had had to call the paramedics, but whenever Maddox and Kuznetsov talked me down. That was a panic attack?

Holy shit. Coach and Doc Williams were right.

Which meant there was a name for this. There was treatment for it.

Oh my God.

I hadn’t even picked up the phone to call a professional, and I didn’t have a clue what kinds of treatments were available, but just realizing there *were* treatments kind of made me want to cry with relief. God knew if any of that shit would work, but it was *real*, and maybe—just maybe—I wouldn’t have to live like this forever.

Holy fuck.

I wouldn’t have to live like this forever.

And maybe…

I swallowed hard, struggling against that lump which was absolutely not moving.

I wanted to call Devin right now. I wanted to see him, tell him I was sorry, and ask him to take me back. But that train wreck I’d been last night? That was still me. And good God, he deserved better than that. The man had enough on his plate; I couldn’t ask him to saddle himself with me when I was so fucked up that I’d probably have another damn panic attack before I finished asking him to take me back.

I wanted to call him, but…not yet. I needed to get my head together first.

Maybe if I got some treatment, I could cope with things. Maybe I could handle the stress of everyday life. Maybe if I talked to someone, got some answers, made a plan, found some hope…

Maybe it won’t be too late to be who Devin needs.

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CHAPTER 34

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DEVIN

The concession vendors have some proposed menus. I've attached them for you to review. Let me know what you think.

Richard

I exhaled and closed the email app on my phone. I was pleased that the ball was well and truly rolling for the low stim hockey nights, but every email or text message from Richard made my chest hurt. It had been almost a week since I'd left Jase's condo, and I still felt like shit. Anything related to hockey was like an extra kick to the balls.

But I couldn't wallow in my feelings or dwell on how much it hurt to think about hockey right now. I had Dallas this week, and after I'd picked her up from school, we'd gone out shopping for a few things she needed for a class project. Normally I'd Amazon Prime a lot of that stuff, but she'd kind of procrastinated on telling me about it, and we didn't have much choice but to brave a few stores to find what she needed.

Fortunately, we'd long ago vetted some places that she could go to without too much trouble. Fluorescent lights couldn't really be avoided, but she had sunglasses to help with those.

Right now, we were at a craft store that was mercifully light on heavily-scented products, and I'd just paused to

check my email on my phone while Dallas perused a rack of unscented markers.

Keeping my poker face was surprisingly easy around her. She was in a good mood, and just knowing that I'd ruin that if I let the mask slip was all the motivation I needed to stay as close to normal as I could.

As we moved on to the aisle with foam core poster board, my phone pinged in my pocket again, but I let it be. It was probably Richard again—he was one of those people who sent like four or five emails in a row because he'd remember a bunch of shit he'd left out of the first—and I'd deal with him when I got home. Especially since I didn't want Dallas to get curious. I hadn't told her yet that I'd been working with the Snow Bears to arrange for more low stimulation hockey nights. I wanted to make sure things actually started happening before I got her hopes up. The poor kid had to deal with enough disappointments and frustrations in her life without me yanking *that* rug out from under her.

Or maybe I was just a coward, which would explain why I still hadn't told her that Jase and I had split up. Sooner or later, I had to tell her, but every time I tried to… I mean, damn. When she was talking excitedly about last night's game, or when she sat down to breakfast in a Snow Bears shirt, or when she was already miserable as hell because another migraine had knocked her flat that afternoon?

Yeah, I probably was a coward. In fact I was pretty sure I was.

And I *would* tell her. I could only hide it for so long, after all. The season would end and I wouldn't be able to brush off his absence as him being on the road with the team.

Just…not tonight. I'd promised myself several times that once I could think about the breakup without my eyes tearing up and my throat getting tight, *then* I could tell her. I was still bound and determined to let her continue being a

fan of Jase Kelly, and I'd ruin that if I broke down crying while I told her we'd broken up.

Coward. Definitely a coward.

"What do you think of this color?" Dallas held up a piece of purple foam core. "It's not too dark, is it?"

"Hmm. It might be if you're going to write on it." I gestured at the next shelf down. "What about that one? It's still purple, but not quite as dark."

She put the first back and took out the lighter one. She lifted her sunglasses, then put them back down and nodded. "Okay. That works."

I held out my hand. She gave it to me, and as she looked over her list, I tucked the foam core under the arm I was using to carry the basket she'd already loaded down with a few markers and a bottle of glue. Then we continued down the aisle.

A scent caught my attention, and my neck prickled. I took a deep breath through my nose. Then another. After a second, it clicked—we were an aisle or two over from the candy-making section, and some of the chocolates they had for melting were strong-smelling. They also didn't generally bother Dallas, so I relaxed.

I exhaled as I followed her. Sometimes it was exhausting, jumping on every stray scent like a bloodhound and quickly analyzing it to make sure I didn't need to take Dallas someplace else. I had to be constantly vigilant for flickering or strobing lights or loud noises. I had to keep her meds with me just like I kept my EpiPen.

Can you really blame Jase for not wanting to sign up for this?

I shook that thought away. No, I didn't blame him. No one wanted to sign up for this. Dallas and I sure as hell hadn't. If it was optional, she'd be first in line to bail. What was the point in hoping someone else could see past all the hypervigilance and abundance of caution?

Watching Dallas compare some different styles of stick-on lettering, I couldn't help getting a lump in my throat. I loved this kid more than life itself. It so wasn't fair what she had to deal with just trying to get from one end of the day to the other. What happened when she was old enough to start dating? Would she have even more trouble holding on to boyfriends or girlfriends than I did? Would anyone else ever love her enough to deal with all of this?

Christ. That was a heartbreaking thought.

Oblivious to me worrying about the future, Dallas picked up a vial of rainbow glitter. "Wouldn't it be funny if Tony rolled in this?"

That actually made me laugh despite everything else in my head. "No. Glitter."

"What?" She huffed melodramatically and returned it to the shelf. "All I want is a sparkly cat."

"Uh-huh. And I'd like the damage deposit back when we move out of that place."

"Pfft. You're no fun."

"You'd be singing a different tune if you were the one who had to vacuum it up. And get it off the cat."

She just laughed. Skimming over her list, she said, "Okay, I think that's everything I need. I have everything else at home."

"You sure?"

She gave it another look, then nodded. "Yeah. We're good."

We took everything up to the register. I surreptitiously checked my credit card balance on my phone to be sure I had enough room to pay for everything, which I did. After I'd paid, we headed out.

At home, we took everything upstairs. She put it in her bedroom, then came back out to get her bookbag, which had her notes and everything else she needed to do the project.

"You need help with any of it?" I asked.

“Not yet. I still need to plan it out.” She slung her bag onto her shoulders. “You don’t mind doing the glue?”

“Not at all. Just let me know when it’s ready to roll.” Her teachers didn’t like parents doing the work on projects, but they also knew we had yet to find a glue—even the unscented varieties—that both held things in place and didn’t trigger Dallas. So it was understood that Haley, Nick, or I would handle anything involving adhesives as long as Dallas did the rest of the work.

“Okay, well…” She gestured toward her room. “I’m going to get to work.”

“All right. Give me half an hour or so, and dinner should be ready.”

She nodded, and she started to go, but hesitated. “Um…”

I watched her. “Hmm?”

She chewed her lip, then looked at me. “Did you and Jase break up?”

I almost jumped out of my skin. “What?”

“You’ve been sad the last few days. And you haven’t mentioned Jase at all.”

Oh. Fuck. So much for playing it cool and keeping it out of her sight.

“Uh.” I cleared my throat and leaned against the kitchen counter, trying to look a lot more relaxed than I was. “Yeah. We did.”

Her shoulders sagged, one of her bookbag straps sliding down her arm. “Really?”

“Yeah.” I swallowed. “It’s, um… It wasn’t a bad breakup. We just…” *Goddammit, Jase. I have to lie to my kid because of you*. “With him being gone all the time, it’s just really hard to keep something going.”

“Oh. Are you, um, still friends?”

Not in this lifetime.

“We didn’t have a big blowup or anything. We’ll see how it goes.”

Dallas nodded. Then she pointed at the poster on the wall. “Should I take that down?”

I considered it, but shook my head. “No. He’s still the same guy you’ve been watching play hockey all this time. And he’s still a really good guy. I don’t want you to stop being his fan. We just…” I shrugged and hoped she couldn’t see all the emotions I was fighting back. “Things just didn’t work out between us.”

“But you’re sad you broke up.”

“Of course. It’s what we needed to do, but it’s still hard.”

“I bet.” Then she came closer and hugged me, and Jesus, I was so going to crumble before too much longer, especially when she said, “I’m sorry you guys broke up.”

“Me too.” I patted her back and willed my eyes not to tear up as she let me go. “I’ll be okay, though. I promise. How about getting going on that project, and I’ll get dinner started?”

Dallas nodded. “Okay.”

“And let me know if you need help with any of your other homework.”

She nodded, and without another word, she headed for her bedroom. As I watched her go, my heart sank even deeper and my chest hurt even more.

I would never in a million years tell her the real reason Jase and I had broken up. I would never tell her that the man we both loved had left because he couldn’t cope with the nightmare she couldn’t escape. I would take that to my grave because I refused to break my daughter’s heart for Jase.

But right now, it was getting to be a hell of a lot easier to hate him.

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CHAPTER 35

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JASE

Doc Williams cleared me to play after two games. The day after my first game back on the ice, I had a Skype session with a therapist who specialized in anxiety. I'd been dubious of her insistence that our first session should be two hours, but in the end, it had barely been enough time. I was exhausted and slept *hard* afterward.

Before we'd ended the call, she'd told me that in addition to figuring out a pharmaceutical treatment, she had some goals for me over the next few weeks and months. Some things she wanted me to overcome.

But as it happened, I was playing in my own hometown two nights later, and I decided I didn't want to wait any longer to hit one of those goals. Especially since we'd both agreed that a shitload of my anxiety was directly related to something I'd left unresolved for far too long.

So, after the game, I rented a car and started driving.

I'd been nervous coming home a few times in my life. Like the time the principal had called my mom to tell her I'd been in a fight with this asshole kid in fourth grade. Or a few occasions where the report card in my backpack meant I was in for a stern lecture. Shit like that always felt like the end of the world for a kid. On some rational level, I'd probably known my parents would forgive me, my life

wasn’t really over, and I wouldn’t actually be grounded until I was dead, but it sure felt like it in the moment.

I had a much more intense version of that same feeling now as I followed the familiar barely-marked two-lane road home, except it seemed…bigger this time. Like something that could legitimately create a rift between me and my parents the way a schoolyard fight or a D in math never would have. It didn’t help that my brother didn’t know how they’d react either. He’d always been the level-headed one who had a better handle on how things would play out, but even he couldn’t get a bead on them this time.

Troy had offered to come with me for this. I’d thought about taking him up on it, because God knew I needed the support, especially while I was figuring out my anxiety and because holy shit, I was still a mess after splitting with Devin a week and a half ago. But if I wanted Troy here with me, then I’d have to wait until the season was over and we could both come visit at the same time. This couldn’t wait. Not another day. And anyway, he was close to our parents. I didn’t want to put him in a position where he had to choose sides. If this went badly, I just hoped it didn’t cost me my relationship with him.

I’ve already lost someone important to me recently, and it’s fucking killing me. I can’t lose my family too.

That made me reconsider this for the thousandth time. Tapping sweaty fingers on the rental car’s wheel, I wondered if I was just setting myself up for more heartache. Did I have to do this? Did I have to do it now?

Yes. Yes, because I needed to know, damn it. I was tired of worrying about how they would take it and what they’d say about it. The unknown was driving me insane, and even though my therapist wanted me to wait until she’d treated me a bit longer, I could feel it in my bones that nothing was going to help while this was still hanging over my head. I’d never be able to get my own head together. I’d never be

able to find the words or the courage or the fucking *breath* to tell Devin I was wrong and I was sorry.

Before any of that happened, I needed to do this. I needed to know.

More than ever, it bothered me tonight that my parents had never said much about gay people when I was growing up. The church our family went to was divided about it, and the annual Pride event in town was always a big controversy, but Mom and Dad never commented one way or the other.

When I said I didn't know how they would take this, I really, *really* didn't know.

My headlights illuminated the familiar green gate at the end of the driveway, and I gripped the wheel tighter. Breathing slowly and evenly, pretending my heart wasn't pounding and my head wasn't spinning, I took the turn and started toward the house where I'd grown up.

Troy and I had offered to buy our parents a place anywhere they wanted, including Maui (Mom's favorite place in the world), but they wanted to stay here, so he and I had gone in halves and paid off the house and property. We'd also bought them a vacation home on Maui as a fortieth anniversary gift, and we made sure they took a trip there at least once a year. Our parents had supported us while we'd skated toward our professional hockey dreams, and we'd both vowed time and again to make it up to them every chance we had. Neither of us would be who we were—men or hockey players—if not for our loving, supportive, incredible parents.

Which was exactly why I was terrified to do this. There was a part of me that legitimately thought it would be better to stay in the closet so I never found out what it was like to have my parents turn their backs on me. But I already hurt like hell over Devin, so I might as well rip off this bandage and get it over with too. Grieve it all at once.

As I pulled up beside Dad's truck in front of the garage, my mind went back to the same question that had been eating at me since long before I'd even met Devin:

Would it be worse to go through life wondering if I was someone my parents would have hated? Or knowing for sure that I was?

Guess I was about to find out.

I shut off the engine and got out of the car. By the time I was halfway to the front porch, the door was open and both of my parents were there to greet me with hugs. Then Mom shooed me inside since it was cold out, and she herded Dad and me down the familiar hall to the familiar kitchen.

Every time I came home, I was secretly glad my parents had stayed here. If they'd ever sold the place, I probably would have bought it myself. This had always been home for me, and the thought of it being gone had always hurt.

I glanced at my parents, and my stomach knotted.

What do I do if this isn't *home anymore?*

In the kitchen, unaware of me turning myself inside out, Mom said, "We're sorry we couldn't make it to tonight's game." She beamed. "You boys sold out the whole arena!"

I laughed, hoping my nerves didn't show through. "You know, you can always let me know if you want to make a game. I can usually get someone to cough up some tickets."

"I'd rather let you pull those strings during the playoffs," she said with a grin. "*Those* games are fun!"

"Okay, okay. If we make the playoffs, I'll see what I can do."

"Good. Now are you hungry? Thirsty?" She gestured over her shoulder. "I just made some coffee. And you're feeling better after the other night, aren't you? They let you play, so I assume…"

I smiled. "I'm fine. Totally back to normal. And sure, coffee sounds great. Thanks." The last thing in the world I needed right now was coffee, but my mom wasn't happy

unless she could fuss over someone, and I didn't dare eat anything. Coffee would have to do.

While she poured cups for all three of us, Dad and I sat at the kitchen table. She joined us a moment later, and we drank in silence for a moment.

As we did, I was sure my nerves were going to turn me inside out if I kept putting this off. Should I just make small talk for a bit? Catch up with them before I drop the bomb? Or get it over with already?

Just do it. It won't be any better just because you were a coward for five more minutes.

"Listen, um…" I drummed my nails on the table. "There's actually a reason I wanted to see you guys tonight. I mean, I always do, but I…"

Both my parents sobered, and they watched me with concerned expressions.

Fuck. There was no turning back now. If I chickened out, then they'd worry themselves sick over what I'd had on my mind.

And anyway…no. I'd waited too long. It had messed up my head too much. This couldn't wait.

"Jason?" Dad asked. "What's on your mind, son?"

I swallowed hard. Well, this was it. Time to put it out there and hope for the best. Not that I'd ever been good at hoping for the best when I was too busy turning myself inside out over the worst-case scenarios.

I took a deep breath. "I, um… I guess I just wanted you guys to know that, um…" I wondered if I could actually say this without puking. Finally, though, the words just came tumbling out: "I want you to know I'm gay."

And throwing up was definitely still on the table, because holy fuck, I'd said it. I'd said the words out loud. To my parents. Right to their faces. Oh shit. Oh shit. There was no pulling them back in, no pretending I—

"Oh, honey." My mom put a hand to her chest. "I wondered when you were going to figure that out."

It took several seconds for me to make sense of what she'd said. "You… *What*?"

"Jason." Dad reached over and gave my shoulder a firm squeeze. "Did you think we didn't know?"

"I…" I flicked my eyes back and forth between them. "Well, *I* didn't know!"

"You didn't?" Mom blinked. "I thought… I mean, we just always thought you were still coming to terms with it and weren't ready to come out."

"So you… You knew? You never said anything." I swallowed. "I didn't even know if you supported gay people, or…"

"We do," Mom said with a nod. "We just didn't know what to say without sounding like we suspected something. We figured you'd come to us in your own time, and we didn't want to make you think we were fishing for it or trying to push you."

"Yep," Dad said. "But maybe we should've said some more. It never even occurred to me you might think we wouldn't support you. I'm sorry, son. I had no idea."

"Did you really think we wouldn't?" Mom asked like she couldn't even fathom that I would ever question their support.

"That's the thing—I didn't know," I said with a heavy shrug. "I hoped you would, but I knew gay kids in school who were really close to their parents, and then got disowned when they came out. I didn't think that was you and Dad, but… To be fair, neither did they."

Mom glanced at my father in horror. "I had no idea." She shook her head. "I thought we were just keeping the pressure off you so you could come to us in your own time." Mom got up, came around the table, and pulled me into a tight hug. "I'm sorry, baby. I didn't realize we were leaving you hanging like that."

I closed my eyes and returned her embrace, relief almost knocking me out of my chair. She held me like that

for a moment, and I had to fight back tears and keep myself from laughing and hold back a million different reactions that didn't seem right, but kind of felt right. I was relieved. I regretted all those years when I could have come out to them and to myself if I'd stopped being in denial. Grieving lost time, hating myself for being such a coward, feeling more secure than I had in a long time about my parents' love—I was pretty sure I felt literally every imaginable emotion right then, and I didn't care if any of them made sense.

This wouldn't magically cure the anxiety I'd just started to understand, but it was like this secret had been choking me all this time, and now I could breathe. And now that I could breathe, I could start dealing with everything else.

When Mom let me go and returned to her seat, I swiped at my eyes and looked at my parents. "How did you know?"

Dad laughed softly. "Son, you weren't exactly subtle."

I stared at him. "Huh?"

He gave my shoulder a firm pat. "You didn't think we noticed your crush on Lane McDaniel?"

"That wasn't a crush. He was an awesome hockey player."

"Uh-huh." Dad arched an eyebrow.

"What?" I shrugged. "It wasn't like I wanted to date him."

"Didn't you?"

"No, I—" My teeth snapped shut. I *hadn't* wanted to date Lane McDaniel, had I? He was an incredible hockey player, and any time I watched him play on TV (or especially if I'd been lucky enough to go to a game), I was in a daze for hours afterward. And why the hell was I suddenly remembering that weird night junior year when I'd been making out with my girlfriend but kept thinking about the hockey game we'd just watched? Specifically, a particular player who'd been killing it on the ice and left me with that dazed feeling and—

“Oh. My God.” I blinked a few times.

Dad patted my shoulder again. “That’s what I thought.”

“But I…” I shook myself. “I didn’t even—I mean, could one of you have *mentioned* it to me?”

“We thought you knew,” Mom said. “We just figured you weren’t ready to come out of the closet.”

“I didn’t even know I was *in* the damn closet.”

Dad tilted his head. “So when did you figure it out, then?”

I exhaled. “Recently. Like, very recently. I thought for a long time I might be, but then I wondered if I’d just let Lila get under my skin, and—”

“Oh Lord,” Mom growled, rolling her eyes. “That woman worked you over about everything, didn’t she?”

I wasn’t even surprised at this point that my parents had noticed, so I just nodded. “Yeah. She and one of my other exes, they kept dropping hints that they thought I was gay. I just figured they—” I was proud of myself for stopping before I said something to my parents about my ex-girlfriends’ consensus about my bedroom performance. That would’ve been awkward. “I didn’t want them to be right, I guess.” Close enough.

“They weren’t right,” Mom said. “They were just trying to be nasty and happened to say something that was true. I don’t think they had a clue who you are.”

“I think they just wanted to hurt your ego and damage your career,” Dad grumbled. “I don’t think either of them liked you being in the spotlight.”

I stared at my parents. It probably shouldn’t have been a shock that they’d observed that much about my last couple of girlfriends. They’d known I was gay before I did, so apparently they were paying attention.

Eyes filled with hope, Mom asked, “So if you’ve figured it out recently and you’re telling us now, does that mean you’re seeing someone?”

My heart sank, and I dropped my gaze. “I, uh… I was, yeah. But we’re not together anymore.” *Damn it, Devin. I miss you so much*. “I need to talk to him. See if we can…” What if I’d already waited too long? What if Devin hated me? “I want to get back together with him, but I don’t know if he does. Or if he…”

Mom watched me for a long moment. “Why did you break up?”

As much as it hurt to even think about it, I told them the whole story. By the time I’d reached the part where Devin walked out of my condo, my eyes stung and my chest hurt. “I didn’t even know there was a name for this. I had no idea this was what anxiety was, or that I’d had panic attacks and anxiety attacks. By the time I realized it, I’d already cut Devin loose, and now I can see it wasn’t him and his kid. It was *me*. It was all this shit in my head that I didn’t know—that I still *don’t* know how to deal with.” Rubbing my eyes, I sighed heavily. “God, I miss him.”

“So why don’t you talk to him?”

“I need to, but I’m…” I met her gaze. “The thing is, his daughter is his world. And I love that kid. But I barely know how to take care of myself. I literally gave myself a panic attack just thinking about trying to be the boyfriend he deserves and the man they need.” I swallowed hard, and my voice came out as a shaky whisper: “I don’t know if I’m cut out to be someone’s stepdad.”

“You don’t know that,” she said softly.

“I’m pretty sure he does,” I whispered. “I can talk to him, but I don’t know if he’ll want to wait around while I get my head together, you know? My therapist said it’s going to take time.” My shoulders sagged. “And anyway, I basically told him I couldn’t be with him because of his kid, just like everyone he’s dated before me. He must hate me for that.”

“Jason. Sweetheart.” She lifted my chin and made me look her in the eye. “I’m sure he doesn’t hate you. You just

need to talk to him. Especially when you tell him you're doing something about this anxiety, I'm sure he'll understand how much that's been controlling your life."

I wanted to cling to that. I wanted a *fraction* of the hope I could see in my mother's eyes. "You really think that'll be enough?"

"It'll be a start." She squeezed my arm. "Apologize. Explain why you did it and why you were wrong. Tell him how much he means to you. Then apologize again."

"And you should remember that advice anyway." Dad's voice was as gentle as Mom's "For arguments in the future."

Laughing dryly, I shook my head. "I don't think I need to remember to apologize profusely. I swear that's all I do all the time. With everyone. Even when we're *not* arguing." I sighed. "My therapist says that's the anxiety talking. It's the reason I always feel like I'm on thin ice with everyone. I'm going to say or do the wrong thing, or they're going to get tired of me being a mental train wreck over every stupid thing. Because I've never known anyone else that freaks out over things like I do." I ran a shaky hand through my sweaty hair. "I'm so tired of living like this."

"That's what your treatment is for," Dad said gently. "It'll take some time, but you can get past that."

I nodded. "Yeah. That's what my therapist said. I just don't know if it's enough time to convince Devin I'm on the rails enough to give me another chance, you know?"

Mom shook her head. "He loved you before you ever knew this was anxiety. And when you explain that your anxiety is what drove you away *and* that you're getting help… I mean, you just need to talk to him, sweetheart."

It took a minute for me to absorb that. Not just the advice itself, but that my mom was giving me advice and encouraging me to try to reconnect with Devin.

I'd driven here, convinced I was about to estrange myself from them forever, and instead…this? They were

trying to help me get back in my ex-boyfriend's good graces? After I'd been terrified all the way here that they couldn't love me as a gay man, it turned out they'd known I was gay all along, they'd never stopped loving me, and now they were telling me to go back to the man I'd stupidly walked away from.

Our son likes dudes? Yep. We know. Now go get your man back.

I wasn't getting kicked out of my family or my childhood home. I was getting love and support I hadn't even realized I'd needed for things I didn't realize had a name. Jesus. Why didn't I do this years ago?

"You okay?" Dad asked.

"Yeah." I opened my eyes and smiled. "Yeah, I'm good. Lot of weight off my shoulders tonight, I guess."

"I believe that," Mom said. "And I really hope you'll talk to that young man."

My heart dropped again. Devin. God, Devin. And Dallas, too. I missed them both like crazy, and Mom was right. I needed to talk to him. Even if it meant showing up long before I had a handle on this anxiety. I wanted to have myself pulled back together, but that was going to take time. A lot of time. I didn't want to spend any more time away from Devin if he'd take me back, and the longer I waited, the more likely he'd move on without me.

Mom reached over and squeezed my arm. "I know it scares you to death. Things like that have always scared you. But you need to stop and ask yourself which scares you more—going and talking to him, or going on without him."

The sudden lump in my throat made it hard to swallow.

She was right. As hard as it was to even think about approaching Devin and trying to salvage things with him, especially when I still didn't know how to cope with anxiety or even *life*, the thought of not having him or Dallas in my world at all was ten times worse.

God, please don’t let me be too late.

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CHAPTER 36

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DEVIN

It would have been a lot easier to get over Jase if he hadn't been so high-profile. And if my kid hadn't been such a big fan. And if I hadn't signed up to help the PR department organize the low stimulation hockey nights for kids.

But I was the father of a Jase Kelly fan, one of the organizers of the low stim nights, and the ex-boyfriend of the man prominently displayed on a huge poster in my damn living room. There was no avoiding him or his hockey team or his name emblazoned across one of the jerseys my kid liked to wear, though she'd quietly stopped wearing them over the last week since she'd found out Jase and I had split. I felt like crap for that. I wanted her to keep wearing those jerseys and being a Jase Kelly fan.

I never should have dated him. So many things in Dallas's world came with heavy limitations, including hockey, and she was a tough kid who made the best of what she could have and what she could do. What the hell kind of dad was I to ruin something good in her life?

A dad who's been lonely too long and thought Jase might be different.

I cleared my throat a couple of times and shook myself. Now was not the time to break down. I had work to do, and I had a miserable kid down the hall who didn't need to see

me getting teary-eyed while she knuckled through her umpteenth migraine. I could cry after I'd gone to bed. For now…

I stared at my laptop and the emails Richard had sent me about the accessible hockey events. He was enthusiastic about it, and so were the players and sponsors. I was too, or at least I wanted to be.

But damn, it was hard tonight.

In my emails, I managed to make myself sound more enthused than I felt right now, so as long as we didn't take this to a phone call or a Skype chat—or, God forbid, meeting in person—no one would be the wiser. And there would be calls and meetings in the near future, so I really needed to get my shit together.

Or I could quit. Should I quit? I should quit.

Except no, I'd committed to it, and I intended to see that commitment through. If I bailed, there was no guarantee someone else would step up and keep the program rolling. There was no guarantee that person would have any actual experience with sensory issues. This was my chance to do this and make sure it was done right. Dallas wanted to be able to go to games, and it turned out there were a lot of kids and adults who couldn't attend regular games for various reasons. If I quit, it was entirely possible the program might be dead in the water. It would be a dick move to pull the plug on the whole thing just because things were awkward between me and one of the Snow Bears.

I closed my eyes and pushed out a breath. Jase and I would be adults about this. The next time we saw each other at a Snow Bears event, I'd feel him out and see how awkward things really were, and we'd go from there. Yeah, this fucking hurt, and no, I really didn't want to see his face again any time soon, but I could get a grip and deal with it when the time came.

I sighed and rubbed my hand over my face.

Okay. I needed a break. And I really needed to check on Dallas.

I put my laptop aside and got up. Moving as silently as I could, I walked down the dark hallway and carefully opened her bedroom door. She didn't move or make a sound, so I slipped in and tiptoed to her bed.

I couldn't see very well, and I didn't dare turn on a light, but from her soft, steady breathing, she was out cold. I sighed with relief. The day had been a rough one, and when I'd checked on her an hour or so ago, she'd still been awake and miserable. At least this meant the pain had receded enough to let her get some rest. Hopefully she'd sleep the rest of the night, and we'd play tomorrow by ear.

Tony was curled up beside her, a black lump on the light-colored comforter. I gave him a little scratch behind his ears, which made him purr, but he didn't lift his head.

With my daughter and cat sleeping peacefully, I stepped out into the hall and carefully shut the door, though I left it open a crack in case Tony wanted out. Once I was alone again, I exhaled and kneaded the back of my neck. Nights like this were hard, but goddammit, Dallas was more than her migraines. She was a great kid. She was stronger than a kid her age should be because she hadn't been left any choice, and she was still sweet, funny, and optimistic. Her migraines were a burden on her, but she was no one's burden, and even though I understood why people balked at our situation, it was frustrating and it hurt. I understood how daunting it was to date a single parent, and how much more daunting it was when there were health issues that affected daily life the way Dallas's did. I got it.

But goddammit, was it really too much to ask for someone to see me as a boyfriend who was *worth* the rest of the package deal? And for someone to see Dallas as a kid who was more than migraines and sensory precautions? Just this *one* time?

Apparently so, given Jase's panic over it.

Heart heavy, my mind and body both beyond exhausted, I shuffled back into the living room and dropped onto the couch. Someone had to get these low stim game nights rolling, and if not me, then who? So I got back to work on responding to emails.

On the end table, my phone vibrated, and I rolled my eyes. *Come on, Richard. Just give it a rest tonight. Please?*

But the second I looked at the screen, my spine straightened. The message wasn't from Richard.

It was from Jase.

Can we talk?

Goddammit. Just seeing his name had my emotions going haywire all over again.

Hands a little unsteady, I wrote back, *Okay?*

It was non-committal and maybe a bit cowardly, but I also couldn't read between the lines of his text to feel him out.

He started and stopped typing several times. Enough times that my screen went dark more than once.

Finally, a message came through:

I'd rather do this face to face.

"Fuck. Seriously?" I glanced down the hall, then wrote back, *I have Dallas tonight.* I didn't mention that she was sick. No way in hell was I using her medical issues to jab at him or try to get sympathy from him.

Okay, he wrote back*. When is good? I'm in town until Tuesday*.

I exhaled into the silence and rubbed my forehead. Did I want to do this? Did I really want to?

Dallas goes back to her mom's on Sunday. Can meet you after.

As soon as I'd sent the message, I cringed. We were doing this, weren't we? I was going to see him face to face, and we were going to talk about God knew what.

Great. Now I just had to keep from losing my mind between now and Sunday.

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CHAPTER 37

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JASE

Pulling into the parking garage of Devin's apartment building, I had never been more nervous in my life, and that said a lot. Despite the handful of coping methods my therapist had given me during yesterday's Skype session, I'd been tempted more than once on the way over here to pull off the road, open the door, and heave a few times. I'd also been tempted to turn back and not do this at all, but I steeled myself and kept driving. Fear be damned, I was doing this.

I parked in a guest spot and headed upstairs. At his door, I hesitated. It wasn't too late to turn around. I'd be a coward, and I'd probably regret it forever, but right here, right now, years of regret sounded a hell of a lot more palatable than facing him and however this was going to go down. If I walked through that door, then I'd probably still be in the same boat—going on without Devin, regretting that I'd ended our relationship, wondering what might've been if I hadn't been so stupid…except I'd also *know* how this encounter went down. Right now, I could still bail. Once we were face to face, well, I'd probably have a lot more to regret than I would if I took off now.

But there was a chance things could turn out right. Devin was willing to talk to me, and while that was probably so he could tell me to my face how much I'd hurt

him, there was a tiny chance he really did want to hear me out.

Still hemming and hawing outside Devin's apartment door, I closed my eyes and tried to hold on to everything my mom had said.

"*Apologize. Explain why you did it and why you were wrong. Tell him how much he means to you. Then apologize again.*"

"*And you should remember that advice anyway,*" Dad had chimed in. "*For arguments in the future.*"

Oh, I'd apologize. I'd tell him why I did it and why I was wrong. The question was, would that be enough? Because apologies didn't guarantee forgiveness, and right now, as I stared down his apartment door with a stomach full of butterflies, I had no way of knowing if Devin would forgive me. What if he did forgive me, but wouldn't take me back? Especially once he realized I was just starting to get my anxiety treated? He had enough on his plate without a boyfriend who—

Just do it. Get it over with.

I raised my hand to knock, but hesitated again. Could I really do this?

"*I know it scares you to death,*" Mom's voice echoed in my ears. "*Things like that have always scared you. But you need to stop and ask yourself which scares you more—going and talking to him, or going on without him.*"

No more hesitation. I knocked.

Footsteps. Oh God.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

Then the deadbolt clicked, and I opened my eyes just as he opened the door, and holy fuck, there he was. He looked as exhausted as I felt, and he looked closed-off too—like he had walls up that I was going to have to do some serious work to bring down.

I swallowed, willing my anxiety to hold back just this one time. "Hey."

“Hey.” Breaking eye contact, he stood aside and gestured for me to come in.

I did, and my heart thumped as I toed off my sneakers. Devin didn’t offer coffee or anything, which was fine—God knew I didn’t need caffeine right now. In silence, we walked into his living room and sat down on his couch, keeping an arm’s length between us. That was about all his couch had room for. I wondered if he wished that middle cushion was a little wider.

Tony sat on top of the armchair, paws curled under him. He watched us, but he didn’t come over and join us like he usually did.

I started to speak, but the wall of hockey memorabilia caught my eye. That poster was still up. Was that something I should hang my hope on? Or was he just leaving it up because he was trying to shield Dallas from everything falling apart between us?

I shifted my attention to him. He was watching me, expression blank. Oh God, he was waiting for me to do this, wasn’t he? Of course he was. I was the one who’d initiated this, and it didn’t matter if I was scared shitless. I’d fucked this up, and it was on me to fix it.

Damn it, I shouldn’t have even bothered. If this is on me, we might as well call it a loss.

But looking into Devin’s eyes right then, I had way too much to lose to let fear choke me. The only thing scarier than opening my mouth and hoping for the best was staying quiet and never touching him again.

Taking a deep breath, I sat straighter. “So, I—”

“Wait.” Devin put up a hand.

I closed my mouth.

He studied me, and his voice was calm, but had a hard edge to it. “Before we waste any time on anything else, there’s one thing I need to know upfront, or else there’s no point in talking about the rest.”

I stared at him, and as I gulped, I nodded. “Okay?”

Devin looked right in my eyes. “That night when Dallas stayed at your place? And those times when I’ve had to take off or end a call to take care of her? I meant what I said—those *aren’t* going away. My daughter and I are a package deal, and that includes her health.” He took a deep breath and sat up a little straighter. “I know it’s a hard thing to deal with, but if that really is a deal-breaker, then we don’t have anything to talk about. If you can’t or don’t want to handle everything that goes along with—”

“What?” I shook myself. “Is *that* what you think this is about?”

Devin stopped, mouth still open in mid-syllable. “You said yourself you weren’t ready to be her stepdad. You had a *panic attack* over it.”

“I’m not sure I’m ready to be *any* kid’s stepdad. Devin, I panicked. It had nothing to do with Dallas’s medical stuff. I mean, that’s hard as hell, and it kills me to watch her *or* you dealing with it, but I wasn’t bailing because of that.”

He blinked.

“Yes, that part does scare me,” I went on, struggling to keep my nerves out of my voice. “But I love you, and I love her, and I’ve been missing both of you like crazy. I just…” I dropped my gaze and ran a hand through my hair as my heart kept beating faster and faster. “I bailed because I was scared.”

“Of what?” His voice was gentler now. His expression probably was too, but I couldn’t look at him.

“Of not knowing how to be…” I closed my eyes, exhaled, then forced myself to meet his gaze. “I’m still figuring out how to be a gay man. I don’t have the first clue how to be a boyfriend. And trying to be both of those things and possibly a stepdad? Or something like a stepdad?” I shook my head. “It was just… It was too much. After you told me it was all or nothing—you and Dallas, or not at all—I was afraid I couldn’t live up to that, and I panicked. Then I really panicked. That was what happened the night I went

to the hospital. And when we sat down to talk, I guess I just felt so out of control, and like I was going to lose it again, and I… I freaked out."

He stared at me, eyes wide and lips apart.

"I can barely function on my own," I said shakily. "Which… the last couple of weeks have made me realize I need to do something about that too. About me."

"What do you mean?"

I swallowed. "My coach wouldn't let me back out on the ice until I talked to someone about having anxiety. And I did. And holy shit, have I got some anxiety, and I…" Goddammit, of all times, why couldn't I pull myself together? I raked a hand through my hair. When the hell had I started sweating? Why couldn't I pull my thoughts together? "Look, I'm…"

"Jase." Devin touched my arm. "Look at me."

I swallowed, then lifted my gaze and looked in his eyes, which somehow simultaneously calmed me down and made the panic burn even hotter. Like his expression was reassuring and soothing, but that just underscored how much I had to lose if I fucked this up. Or even if I got it right but it was too little too late.

"Slow down, okay?" he whispered. "So this was… What happened the night we broke up…"

"It wasn't because of you. It was because of me." I held his gaze, though it was a struggle, and my voice was unsteady as I whispered, "Look at me. That night I went to the hospital? It's not usually that bad, but it happens a lot. I can't tell you how many times it's happened. Anything stresses me out, and…" I held up my hand between us so he could see how bad it was shaking. "When I say I left because I panicked, I mean I *panicked*. And I panic about… God, about everything. Like, I can't just enjoy the two of us together or hanging out with Dallas because my brain starts spiraling down. The night before we broke up was the first time I went to the hospital and the first time in a

long time it cost me any time on the ice. So I just felt like everything was out of control, and I…" I took a breath. "Remember when you said the world is every other kid's oyster, but it's Dallas's minefield?"

Wordlessly, Devin nodded.

"Okay, well, I had a coach tell me once that I'm the oyster. And every time the world gives me some kind of grit, I obsess over it and obsess over it, but instead of making a pearl, I make myself crazy." I paused, then laughed, shaking my head. "That probably made a lot more sense in my head."

"No," he said softly. "It makes sense. It really does."

I looked at him again, and his expression was full of sincerity. Maybe those walls hadn't come down, but he wasn't shoving me back either. Cautiously, I went on. "So with us, and with Dallas… I mean, when you told me you and Dallas are a package deal and I needed to make a decision…" I wiped a hand over my face and exhaled. "I just couldn't get that out of my head, you know? I couldn't handle it, but it wasn't because of Dallas's migraines or because you're a single dad. It's because I can't handle *anything*. Then suddenly I'm losing it because I need to make a decision, and I don't have the first clue how to be a stepdad, or—"

"Jase." He gave my arm a gentle squeeze and looked right in my eyes. "Okay, first, don't get ahead of yourself."

I held his gaze, not sure what to make of the comment.

Devin smiled. "For one thing, no one's expecting you to step up and be the only father figure in Dallas's life. She has me, she has Nick, and if things work out with us, she'll have you. Between the three of us, I'd say she already drew a pretty damned good hand."

My heart was still thumping, but it slowed down just a little. "Really?"

He nodded. "Yes. And it isn't like I'm an expert at this either."

“Except you’ve been doing it for twelve years.”

“Uh-huh. And you’ve never seen fear like the day someone handed me a brand new baby, told me it was my responsibility to take care of her, and wished me the best of luck. If someone handed me a newborn today, I’d still be intimidated as hell, but the only reason I’d be less scared than I was last time is I’ve done it before. But I’ve never been a dad to a thirteen year-old. Or a fourteen year-old.”

“Oh.” My shoulders started to relax. “I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

“I didn’t either until I started doing this. Trust me—I’ve been learning as I go. So have Nick and Haley, and so will you. And honestly? It means a lot that you’re this concerned about being good to Dallas. I thought you left because you couldn’t handle everything that comes along with her medical issues, and…” He sighed, shoulders dropping along with his gaze. “I think this is my fault.”

“What do you mean?”

Devin rubbed his neck, still not looking at me. “I came on too strong. Haley has been after me for years, telling me I need to slow my roll when I tell partners—God. Jase.” He finally met my eyes. “I am so sorry. I shouldn’t have given you an ultimatum, or even implied I was giving you one. I’ve been stewing over this and thinking you left like everyone else, but…” He swallowed hard. “I mean, I basically shoved you out the door. I’m sorry. I was… I didn’t mean to do that. I was just scared.”

“You were?”

Devin nodded. “I’ve dated a lot of people who couldn’t handle the medical merry-go-round and the stress.” He looked in my eyes and smiled. “But then it turns out you were just afraid you wouldn’t be enough for her. After dating so many people who thought she and I were too much…” He paused to swipe at his eyes. “Honestly, it tells me Haley’s been right all along that I’ve pushed people too hard to make a decision. And it’s… It tells me you’re

exactly the kind of man I want in my life and in my daughter's."

I stared at him, not sure I'd heard him right. "But I still don't know what to do. For you. For Dallas."

"Yeah, you do." He squeezed my hand. "You've been amazing with me. With Dallas… I mean, Nick figured out his own relationship with her. She already had a mom and a dad, and he just sort of found his own niche with her. What you and Dallas already have is…" Devin shook his head. "I wouldn't change a thing about it."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. You're her friend. She adores you. Everyone always says not to meet your heroes because you'll be disappointed, but Dallas is an even bigger fan of yours now that she knows you." He smiled. "No, there isn't a damn thing I could change about how things are between you and her. I don't want you to be her dad or her stepdad or whatever. I just want you to be…*you*." He squeezed my hand. "That's all I've ever wanted from you for me too. Just you."

"That's… That's good." I managed a nervous laugh. "Because that's all I've got."

Devin's smile made my heart go wild. "It's more than you think. And seriously—I'm sorry. God, I should've known you had anxiety, and I… Just. I'm sorry."

"I know. But, um, going forward…" I took a deep breath. "I mean, I can figure things out with Dallas, but I also don't know how to be a boyfriend. My last few relationships were disasters, and—"

"And your ex-girlfriend was manipulative and abusive." The venom in the comment startled me. Voice softening, Devin said, "You've been just fine as a boyfriend. You probably were with her too, but she's got you second-guessing yourself at every turn." He studied me, then added in an even softer voice, "And I'm no expert, but I

think a lot of this will get easier for you the more your anxiety gets addressed."

"Let's hope." I laughed dryly. "I never realized that's what was happening every time I get worked up over something, but man, once my coach and then the therapist laid it all out? I can't believe I didn't put it together before. Because anxiety is the only thing more constant in my life than hockey. And… I'm sorry. You've had to put up with me freaking out over everything, and…" My stomach lurched, but I kept going anyway. "In the beginning, I told you it doesn't happen often, but that was because I was afraid to tell you the truth."

He inclined his head. "Which is?"

"That it happens all the time. Like, *all the time*." I wiped a shaking hand over my face and avoided his eyes. "You haven't seen it much because I've been on the road, but sometimes… Well, now I know they're panic attacks. I didn't realize that's what they were, but apparently they are. My team, they're so used to it that they know when I start falling apart, send in Maddox or Kuznetsov to talk me down."

"So there's someone there when you're on the road?" Devin asked. "Someone who can help?"

"Yeah, but it stresses them out. They shouldn't have to do that. And neither should you." I swallowed hard. "And I mean, the bottom line is that I know all this"—I tapped my temple—"isn't normal. And I'm finally getting help for it because I can't keep leaning on people like that or running away from everything. I can't keep *living* like that."

"You shouldn't have to. And the therapy—how is it going so far?"

"Good. Really good." I pushed out a relieved breath. "I should've talked to someone ages ago, but I was afraid of getting disqualified from hockey, which is the only thing I'm good at, and I guess I kind of didn't want to know. But I didn't even realize how much it was running my life, or that

it was something that could be treated, you know?" I paused, then forced myself to look in his eyes even though I was terrified. "I let it convince me that I was better off without you, or that I can't handle being what you and Dallas need. And that's bullshit. My life is *so much better* with you in it, and if you can just give me some time to figure this out and—"

"Hey." Devin took my hand, which I hadn't realize had started shaking. "Take a breath, okay?"

I did. Fuck, there really was something wrong with me when people had to keep telling me to breathe. After a few slow breaths, I said, "I'm sorry. Just… I'm trying to fix this, because living like this sucks, and it took losing you to make me see how much it's really running my life. If you don't want to wait around while I deal with that, I'll understand. But I just… I needed you to know I made a mistake when I left. And I'm sorry."

"Jase. It's…" He exhaled. "Okay, first, there's nothing wrong with you."

"There *better* be. This can't be right, can it?"

He shook his head. "I mean, there's nothing wrong with *you*. It's not a flaw. It doesn't make you a bad person any more than Dallas's migraines make her a bad kid."

I blinked.

Devin went on, "I don't want you to think getting back together with me would be contingent on you *fixing* something, you know?"

I studied him, not sure I followed.

Devin's expression stayed serious and his voice stayed gentle. "I think it's great that you're getting help. I want you to get help, but I want you to do it for *you*. Because I can see that you're miserable, and I want you to be happy. But that was never a condition of me dating you."

My shoulders slumped and I pushed out a breath. "Thank God for that."

"Did you think it would be conditional?"

“No. I… I don’t know what I thought. I just think being with me has got to be exhausting.” I laughed humorlessly. “*Being* me is exhausting.”

“I’m sure it’s exhausting for you. But there’s help for that.”

I nodded. “Yeah. I know. Except part of me is still scared my therapist will tell me I’m stuck with…” I tapped my temple.

Devin shook his head. “I doubt anything will make it disappear completely, but it can be *better* than it is right now. And I hope it will be a lot better, and soon.”

“Thanks,” I whispered. “And, I um… I know whatever they do, it’ll take time. If you don’t want to be around for it, I’ll—”

“Jase.”

I met his gaze.

And to my surprise, he smiled. “I wasn’t going anywhere while your anxiety was at its worst. I’m sure as shit not going anywhere while you’re getting help for it.”

“You’re…” I blinked. “Wait, does this mean you’ll take me back?”

He actually laughed, and as he slid his hand over mine, he nodded. “Of course. I’m the one who shoved you out the door. I should be asking *you* to take *me* back.”

“You…really?”

“Yeah. Really.” He brought my hand up and kissed my palm. “Nothing’s been right since then. I was just afraid you’d left because you didn’t want to sign up for, well, everything, and yes, I was pissed about that, but now that I know that wasn’t the issue…”

“God, no, it’s not.” I touched his cheek, the warmth of his stubbled skin sending a rush of relief right through me. “I miss that kid, damn it.”

Devin laughed, which only added to my relief, and then he pulled me in and wrapped his arms around me. I buried my face in his neck, fighting back tears because I’d

convinced myself that at least a hundred worst-case scenarios were way more likely to happen than this. I'd say something stupid. I'd make things worse. He wouldn't want to hear it anyway. There was no chance, and no point, and I was only torturing myself by trying.

But somehow…

Holding him tighter, I whispered, "I missed you."

"I missed *you*." He stroked my hair. "I love you, Jase."

Squeezing my eyes shut, I murmured, "I love you too. God, I still can't believe this. I thought I'd completely fucked everything up."

"No, you didn't." He sighed against my neck. "I fucked up. I should've told you I was worried about my situation with Dallas scaring you off without, you know, scaring you off."

"And I should've told you I was afraid I didn't know how to be a boyfriend or a stepdad."

"Yeah, but I know now."

I drew back again, this time to meet his eyes. "I, um… I was afraid to tell my parents too. Almost thirty, and I was terrified of…"

Devin tilted his head. "You were afraid? Does that mean…"

I nodded and whispered, "I came out to them. I was so tired of not knowing, and worrying myself sick over what they'd do. My therapist wanted me to wait, but I just couldn't. And since I had a game in my hometown, I went over. And I told them."

He swallowed. "How did it go?"

Laughing, I said, "They've known all along."

Devin blinked. "They have?"

"Yeah. They just never said anything because they didn't want to push me out of the closet before I was ready."

"Oh my God," he said on a sigh. "That must be a huge relief."

"It is. Definitely." I touched his face. "So is this."

Holding my gaze, he smiled and covered my hand with his. “It’s a relief for me too.”

I smiled back, but it faltered. “For the record, I’m still scared of all the rest. I *don’t* know how to be a boyfriend or anything like a stepdad.” I ran the pad of my thumb across his cheekbone. “I just know I want to be.”

His smile melted my heart right then and there. I didn’t have the first clue how I’d do it, but one way for the other, I was going to find a way to be everything this man and his daughter deserved.

Without a word, Devin slid his hands around the sides of my neck, and he kissed me more gently than I think anyone had *ever* kissed me. Relieved, turned on, and still not quite sure this was even real, I wrapped my arms around him, and he sighed as we deepened the kiss.

God, yes, this was everything. Devin was the best thing to ever happen to me, losing him had been the worst, and coming back to this was a kind of relief I’d never even tasted before. Like everything had been right, then it had all gone wrong, and now it was not only right, it was going to *stay* right. And get *better*.

“I love you,” I whispered shakily. “Jesus, Devin…”

“I love you too.” He ran his fingers through my hair. “And, um, if you’re not in too much of a hurry to take off…” He nodded down the hall, a wicked glint in his eyes.

My knees went weak. “If I *was* in a hurry, I’m not anymore.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Devin’s grin made my entire body hot all over.

We rose, and Devin laced our fingers together and led me toward his bedroom.

In a matter of seconds, we’d kicked off everything and climbed into bed together, and holy fuck. I’d thought I could walk away from him? From someone who could make

me feel this way just by kissing me and touching me and being naked against me? What was I thinking?

It didn't matter now, because we were back. The first time we'd been in bed together had been exciting and new and terrifying, but tonight it was like coming home. Not because I was out of the closet and in bed with a man, but because I was in bed with Devin. I didn't care about performing or measuring up. I just wanted to hold on to him until I had absolutely no doubt this was real and not a dream.

Like this, I was sure of myself in ways I'd never been with anyone. I knew I could make Devin come, and I knew I could make him gasp and arch and moan, but mostly I knew I didn't have to be perfect—in bed, in our relationship, in life. Devin knew me in ways nobody else had ever bothered to, and he was still kissing me and touching me like I was his biggest fantasy come true. Tangled up with him, there was no pressure, no stress. Just hunger.

"I want you so bad," I said between kisses.

His lips curved against mine. "I'm all yours. As long as you want me."

Kissing him deeper, I held him closer. "Think we should put the fire department on speed dial?"

Devin laughed, and oh my God, that was even better than the sexy moans and gasps. I loved the way he laughed, especially in bed. When he was so relaxed and so into it and so completely at ease—what could I say? It was a hell of a turn-on.

"Tell me what you want," I whispered. "I just want you to feel good, and I—"

"Fuck me." He dragged his hands up my back as he pressed his hips against mine. "There's lube on the…" He nodded toward the nightstand.

Fuck him? Fuck yes.

I got the lube, and we spent a long, lazy time kissing while I fingered him. He always loved being prepped forever, and tonight was no exception—long after he could easily take two fingers, he was rocking his hips in time with my hand while our kisses muffled his soft moans and those little gasps that drove me wild.

Finally, though, he grabbed my wrist.

"Now," he murmured against my lips. "Don't… Don't wanna wait anymore."

"Neither do I." I kissed him again as I slipped my fingers free. "Turn over."

He did, and I was even more jittery than I'd been when I'd come to his door tonight. It wasn't nerves, though—it was straight-up excitement surging through me. I needed him so bad I was shaking, and it was a goddamned miracle I didn't come the second the head of my cock pushed into his ass, especially when he whispered, "*Fuck*."

I'd have said the same thing if I could've breathed at all. As it was, I was lucky I managed to hold myself up and ease into him, and I just reminded myself over and over to take it slow and not come and go easy and *please, please, don't come yet*.

And damn it, I wanted to touch him more. Kneeling behind him was hot, but there was way too much untouched skin.

"Go all the way down." I leaned forward. "On your stomach."

Devin sank onto the mattress, and I followed. Sighing against his neck, I rocked my hips and slid deeper inside him. Fuck…he was so hot. And he was *here*. And no matter how bad I thought I'd screwed this up, Devin was here, and he was murmuring soft little pleas for my dick as I held him close and rode him as slowly as I could. Fast and rough was fun, but I needed to *feel* him tonight. I needed to remind myself over and over, with every touch and kiss and stroke,

that we'd made it back, and nothing had been done that couldn't be undone.

I've never loved anyone like this, I couldn't quite say out loud right then, *and there is nothing I won't do to make you happy.*

I buried my face against his neck and breathed him in as I kept riding him slowly.

"Oh my God," he moaned into the pillow.

"That good?"

A choked groan told me it was. Then Devin lifted his hips a little and pushed his hand under himself. I knew the instant he grabbed his own dick because he clenched around mine, and we both groaned.

"Ooh, yeah…" He gripped the edge of the mattress with his free hand and arched under me. "Oh God, baby, don't stop."

I nipped the back of his shoulder and kept going, thrusting deep but not hard, keeping that steady rhythm that was driving him wild. In this position, my body molded to his, I could feel almost every muscle tensing, and when he came with a strangled shout, I felt the tension and release, and I rode it until I was coming too. Holding on to him tighter than I'd ever held on to anyone, pushing myself as deep as he could take me, I came so hard I almost cried. And I didn't care if I did cry. I had Devin. I was inside Devin. He loved me. He'd taken me back, dents and all.

For the first time in my life, I knew who I was, and someone else knew who I was, and he'd loved me even before I'd said I was going to get help for my anxiety. When he said he'd have loved me if I'd never gotten help, I believed him, and when he said he'd support me while I did get help, I was beyond grateful for him.

"I love you, Devin," I whispered shakily into his hair.

"I love you too."

He loved me, and he was back, and everything felt right now that I was holding him again.

And I hoped he never wanted me to let go.

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CHAPTER 38

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DEVIN

Still shaky and now damp and hot from a shower, Jase and I sank onto the mattress together.

"Oh my God," he murmured. "I needed that."

"Me too." I cuddled close to him, savoring his body heat and his strong arm around my shoulders. For all I'd been guarded when he'd arrived, for as many times as I'd considered ignoring his text or telling him forget it, I was damn thankful I'd heard him out. I pressed a kiss to his warm skin. "I'm really glad you reached out."

"Me too." He shifted, turning on his side, and we faced each other on the pillows. "I still feel so stupid for walking away from this." He clasped my hand in his between our chests. "If I walked away from everything that scared me, I'd never do anything, you know?"

"But I gave you a pretty hard shove. And even if I hadn't, you had every right to be intimidated by it all."

"Really?"

"Well yeah. I mean, you don't think becoming a dad terrified me?"

"Did it?"

"Oh, yeah." I nodded. "I was a hundred percent *not* planning to be a dad right then, and I hadn't even decided if I ever wanted to be one. Then suddenly Haley's pregnant,

and the next thing we know, they're handing us a newborn baby and sending us home with two pages of instructions."

He laughed quietly. "Two pages?"

"Eh, it was probably more than that, but it pretty much boiled down to 'feed her, her change her, don't drop her, and you'll figure out the rest, but you'd better do it right or you'll fuck her up for life. No pressure.'" I rolled my eyes. "Real helpful."

"Okay, yeah, that sounds terrifying."

"It was. But we figured it out." I smiled, squeezing his hand. "So I get it. The instant family thing is not for the faint of heart. I just… I guess when you said it was too much, I thought you meant because of her medical issues. Because God knows you wouldn't have been the first."

"That's kind of messed up," he said. "That people leave over that."

I shrugged tightly. "It's a tough thing to deal with. It's frustrating to have people walk away, but I get it. And… I think maybe some of them *have* left because I pushed them away. Same way I pushed you away." I stroked his thumb with mine. "I'm just damn lucky you were stubborn enough to come back anyway."

He shook his head and brought our hands up to kiss my palm. "Nah. It wasn't that. I just had to get out of my own head and stop being intimidated by the whole damn world."

I nodded. "Still. I'm sorry."

"Me too."

"And, listen, um… I don't want to put pressure on you. I don't need you to be a stepfather to my kid, but I do have to protect her as much as I can. She adored you long before we ever met or thought about dating, and I don't want to take that away from her."

Jase swallowed, nodding slowly. "Yeah. I get that."

I went on, "If we do try this again, it can't be an on-off thing. I'm not asking for a commitment, or telling you we have to lock this down forever. Just…" I chewed my lip as I

searched for the words, and after a moment, I exhaled, shoulders sinking a bit. “I just can’t put a revolving door on us. I can’t deal with it myself, but I *cannot* do that to my daughter.”

He nodded again. “I totally get that. And I don’t want to do the on-off thing either. It’s exhausting. Been there, done that.” Jase searched my eyes. “But…how do we do that? Dating me isn’t going to be easy, and—”

“Don’t put this all on you.” I squeezed his hand. “We’re both in this. All I’m asking is that we talk things through and we don’t make any rash decisions about staying together or breaking up. If we’re not in it for the long haul, then we’re not, but we can do it without dragging her through it, you know what I mean?”

“Yeah. I do.” He watched our hands between us, his thumb rubbing against mine as deep crevices formed between his eyebrows. “Maybe, um…”

“Hmm?”

Jase inhaled slowly. “Maybe if we hit a rough patch, we can talk to someone. A counselor. Just… Even if they can’t help us put things back together, then maybe they can help us walk away peacefully. So it’s easier on Dallas. And us.”

I blinked. “That’s a really good idea.”

“Is it?”

“Of course it is. I’m not opposed to outside professional help. Not at all.” I watched him silently for a moment, noting the creases in his forehead that hadn’t relaxed. “You’re still worried about things, aren’t you?’

Jase laughed self-consciously, still avoiding my gaze. “To be fair, that’s kind of my natural state.”

“Maybe it won’t be for long.”

He looked at me then, confusion written across his expression.

“I think…” I hesitated. Lacing our fingers together between our chests, I chose my words carefully. “Hopefully

the more your therapist works with you, that *won't* be your natural state anymore."

Jase closed his eyes and blew out a breath. "God, that would be nice. I don't even know what it's like to not be this way. And I'm sorry I didn't tell you about it sooner. It's…um…"

"Probably not something you enjoy talking about."

"No. Especially since I never know how someone's going to take it. My ex…" He waved a hand. "She wasn't great about it. Let's just leave it at that. Some of my buddies have gotten tired of it."

"What about your teammates? Do they know?" I paused. "Wait, you said they do. That some of them help you."

Jase nodded. "They do. And it's not like I can really hide it from them. They see me more than most people. And they're… Well, they know about it. If they think I'm getting ready to lose it—I can't believe I didn't realize those were panic attacks, but… Anyway. Like I said, they know to grab Maddox or Kuznetsov, and they can help me ride it out."

"That's great that you've got some one there who can help you. Especially two of them."

"Right?" Jase exhaled. "And the other guys… I mean, I'm sure they're not thrilled about it, but I guess they figure as long as I can still play hockey, they can deal with me being a train wreck in the locker room."

"You're not a train wreck." I pressed a kiss to his knuckles. "You just have some hardcore anxiety, and I'm really, really glad you're getting it treated." I paused. "For *your* benefit, not mine. You'll probably be a lot happier once you can get a handle on it, you know?"

He nodded.

"I'm serious. There's no shame in seeing a therapist. In fact, I'll probably start seeing one again eventually."

He tilted his head. "What for?"

I shrugged. "Just someone to talk to when I'm trying to figure out how to handle something that Dallas is going

through, or sort out my stress so I can cope with it." I sighed. "When I can afford it, anyway."

Jase bit his lip, and his brow was tight.

"I'm sorry." I shook my head. "I'll figure something out." I managed a smile as I draped an arm over him. "Feeling too good to bitch about health insurance and medical debt right now."

He smiled faintly, but he obviously had something on his mind. After a moment, he covered my hand with his and looked me in the eye. "What if cost wasn't an issue?"

I tensed. "Jase…"

"I'm not going to say let's go elope so you can get on my insurance." He shook his head. "If we decide to make that commitment down the line, fine. But right now…" Jase looked in my eyes. "Money is keeping you from going to a therapist. It's keeping Dallas from getting to specialists who might be able to do more for her." With a shrug, he softly added, "But if I can help, then let me help."

I blinked. "But that's… I mean, we're talking potentially thousands of dollars. Like, tens of thousands of dollars. I can't ask you to foot that kind of bill."

"Why not?" He stroked my cheek. "You said yourself the hardest part about Dallas's medical issues is that you can't do anything to fix it. That's… I mean, that's the hard part for me too. Knowing you would both be happier and healthier if you could see people who can help?" He swallowed. "What kind of man would I be if I could help, and didn't?"

"Are you… You'd really…"

"Yes," he whispered. "Especially if money is the only thing standing between Dallas and the treatment she needs. I mean, I can't think of anything I could spend it on that's more important than her being able to go more than a few days without being in that kind of pain."

I stared at him. "But that's… I mean, MRIs alone are a few grand, and—"

“Devin. Baby.” He smiled with a hint of shyness but a whole lot of sincerity. “I’ve *seen* her in pain. If a doctor comes along and says he’ll help her if I give him the Aston Martin, I’ll have the pink slip in his hand by the end of the day along with a set of season tickets.”

My lips parted, and my throat was a little tight as I said, “Seriously?”

“Of course.”

“That’s… That’s amazing. You know that, right?”

“I just want to help.”

My voice wavered as I laughed softly and touched his face. “You know, for a guy who didn’t think he could pull off being a stepdad…”

Jase wrapped his arms around me and kissed the top of my head. “I freaked out over that, yeah, but just because I don’t know what I’m doing doesn’t mean I don’t care about her. Or about you. That’s exactly *why* it scared me so much. Because I *do* care, and I was afraid to fuck up. So then I did fuck up by leaving, and—”

“Hey.” I drew back a little, brought his hand up to my lips, and kissed his knuckles. “This is all new territory for you. I get that it scared you. Something that new, plus your anxiety—I get it.” I laughed softly, squeezing his hand. “And now you’re willing to do all this to help her, I… Fuck, Jase.”

He smiled. “Anything for you. Both of you.”

Oh my God. This man. As if I hadn’t already been overwhelmed by having Jase back in my life, now I was utterly bowled over by the idea of him helping me step up Dallas’s medical care. Access to therapy for myself sounded great, but I swore my need for therapy was almost negated just by the metaphorical door opening to neurologists and specialists who might be able to *do something* for my daughter.

I leaned in and wrapped my arms around him. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

“I just want you happy.”

“I am,” I murmured against his lips. “And I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“I’m also *really* glad you came back.”

“So am I.” He kissed me softly. “Thanks for the second chance.”

I just grinned and kissed him again, and we lost ourselves in holding each other.

Kissing Jase always made me dizzy, but my head was spinning even faster tonight because he was back, and because… Holy shit, he really was amazing. Nothing would be magically fixed, and even with Jase footing the bill, there wouldn’t necessarily be some magic pill that would cure Dallas’s migraines. There was no guarantee that his therapy would help him fully control the anxiety that had ruled him all his life. Our relationship wouldn’t be perfect or easy.

But having him here with me again meant that *something* in my world was right. Something big. After years of partners who shied away from the reality of being with someone whose child had significant medical needs, I’d found Jase. I’d found a man who was not only willing to accept the price of admission for dating me, he wanted to help in any way he could. In real, concrete ways that might just make a difference in my daughter’s quality of life.

For years, I’d been sure it would take ages to find someone who could love me and my daughter, and who could weather everything that came with us. I wasn’t sure I’d ever find that someone.

But it hadn’t taken forever. The perfect man for me had shown up at the perfect time for us.

I had no illusions that things would be easy, but I had no doubt they’d be worth it.

And for the first time in a long time, I was excited about the future.

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EPILOGUE

Jase

About eighteen months later.

"You ready for this, Kelly?" Maddox elbowed me on the bench. "Or do you need a bucket?"

I chuckled nervously. "Fuck off. I'm not going to puke."

"Well, just in case." Gagnon plunked a bucket in front of me. "You're welcome."

My teammates howled and applauded. I rolled my eyes and laughed too. "You guys are assholes." I kicked the bucket at Gagnon, hitting him in the shin with a satisfying *crack*. He hopped and swore, which had us all laughing even harder.

The locker room door opened, and when I looked up, my heart was instantly pounding even harder.

"Hey guys." Devin flashed a quick smile at my teammates as he crossed the room, and then he bent to brush a kiss across my lips. "Ready for this?"

"We're always ready for this," Maddox said. "Are *you* ready for it?"

I shot Maddox a *shut the fuck up* look, which got a snicker out of him.

Devin eyed him, then dropped onto the bench to take off his shoes and put on his skates. "Of course I am. I can

actually skate without busting my ass now."

"Of course you can," Kuznetsov said with a smirk. "That's what happens when you take lessons from an actual professional."

I flipped off my teammate, and Devin snickered. "He's not wrong, baby."

"What?" I turned an exasperated look on him. "I wasn't a good enough instructor?"

"I didn't say that." He paused to push his foot into his skate. "But I *did* get better after taking lessons."

"That's because you took *regular* lessons," I muttered. "It was *consistency*, not the instructor."

"Whatever you say, sweetheart."

I elbowed him. He elbowed me back. We both laughed, and my teammates just chuckled and muttered some comments about us being an old married couple.

Once he'd laced up his skates, Devin stood. "All right. I'll see you out on the ice. Play safe."

"I always do. You know that."

"Uh-huh. Sure you do."

We laughed again, and he came down for another soft kiss.

Which, of course, prompted more cheering and heckling from my teammates.

Devin and I rolled our eyes. We were used to it after all this time, and it was all in good fun.

He headed for the chute with Richard and one of the other members of the team that arranged the low stim hockey nights like this one, and as I watched him go I couldn't help smiling. He'd struggled like hell in skates back when I'd first started teaching him. By the time he and Dallas had decided to take weekly lessons together, they'd both been pretty competent, and now they moved easily on and off the ice. I loved that—ice skating had become something we could do together. Dallas's mom and

stepdad were even learning now too, so it was really turning into a family thing.

The team was heading for the chute, so I got up, checked my pocket, put on my gloves, and then picked up my stick and visor.

Moments later, I joined my teammates on the ice. We warmed up at one end while at the other end, the visiting team—the Ice Giants, who we'd be playing for real tomorrow night—took the other end.

Lit only by the stadium lights, the stands were mostly empty. I thought Devin said there were maybe four hundred people tonight. all scattered throughout the ground level of seats so everyone could see and had some breathing room. The crowds had steadily grown over time, made up of people who couldn't come to games for various reasons along with their families, but Devin carefully kept the crowds from getting too big and defeating the purpose.

Someone was walking through and offering concessions, which were from a strictly limited menu Devin had helped curate with foods that weren't likely to trigger migraines or sensory issues.

It wasn't a huge crowd, but there were smiles all around, and I waved at some kids as I chased a puck behind the goal.

As I continued skating, the relative silence in the arena was eerie. I could hear every smack of stick against puck, every swoosh of skate on ice, every comment from every player. And I was more or less used to it, since the low stim games were always this quiet.

The only problem tonight was that the lack of noise made it *really* hard to ignore my pounding heart.

That only got worse after we retreated to the locker room to let the ice resurfacers come out.

Oh, hello, nerves.

I actually had to laugh at the all too familiar queasy jittery feeling. I'd gotten so used to *not* experiencing it, that

having it come back tonight of all nights was almost poetic.

And it made me realize just how much my life had changed over the last year and a half or so. My parents, team, coaching staff, and of course my boyfriend had been incredibly supportive while I had my anxiety treated. My therapist? Wow, she was a godsend. Who knew there were so many coping methods I could use and triggers I could avoid? That sometimes just talking through the things that made me anxious could, over time, dull their sharp edges and make them easier to face.

During the off season, we'd experimented with a couple of medications. The first had had side effects I couldn't deal with, but the second… Holy shit. How had I been living without this? My therapist told me one of her patients described it as spending her whole life sucking in her stomach, keeping those muscles uncomfortably tense all the time, and then the medication let her relax her core and *breathe*. That wasn't far from what I felt after a few weeks on this stuff.

I'd been a little worried about how it would affect my job, though. Even after I'd been reassured anxiety wasn't a disqualifying condition, and that my meds weren't a substance banned or controlled by the league, so I could still take it during the season, I'd worried it would hurt my performance. Would it slow me down? Screw with my concentration?

There'd been only one way to find out. I'd let my coaches and teammates know about it, and we'd basically played it by ear through practices, pre-season, and finally regular season games.

"Whatever they're giving you," Coach said during the first intermission of my second or third regular season game, "tell them to keep it coming."

"Really?"

"Son, I've never seen you that focused out there."

And when I'd thought about it, he was right. Now that my brain was quieter, now that it wasn't constantly whirring and near-panicking over something, I *could* focus.

More than that, I'd been ten games into this season before I realized my post-game shower-and-calm-down routine had become a habit, but wasn't something I actually needed anymore. The shower, yes—I was still gross after a game—but the shaky comedown after the adrenaline crash? Not so much. I could concentrate on a game, play my heart out, and then take off my skates and live a normal, low-stress life that I hadn't even realized I'd been missing. The pressers weren't even the struggle they'd been for my entire career. Still nerve-racking, still absolutely not my favorite thing anymore, but my therapist had given me a few coping methods that helped me deal with the cameras and microphones in my face.

My entire world was different now, and a day didn't go by that I didn't stop and wonder how the fuck I'd managed when the anxiety had had control.

The low-stimulation hockey nights had caught on and become a regular thing, and other teams had started getting onboard too. If schedules allowed, visiting teams would join us for those games the night before we played for real, and we'd joined teams for similar games in their cities.

In fact this kind of event—along with smaller signings, quiet meet-and-greets, and carefully organized gatherings for fans who couldn't come to games—had caught on so much that Richard couldn't handle the workload on top of his usual job. So, he'd wanted to hire someone to focus full-time on organizing these events, promoting them, and reaching out to fans who'd benefit from them.

How convenient that we both knew someone who'd been eager to quit a miserable job and do something else.

Devin *loved* his new job. He'd worked out contracts with the food vendors to have snacks available to accommodate

fans with food-related or scent triggers. Lighting, noise, seating, accessibility—he was constantly figuring out new ways to let fans come enjoy hockey when a regular game wasn't doable for them. Instead of pushing paperwork around and crunching numbers for someone else's bank account, he was doing something creative that actually helped people. Haley had even commented early on that she'd never seen him happier. I agreed.

The best part? The job qualified him for league benefits, which meant he and his daughter had top-of-the-line healthcare coverage now.

Even before that, though, paying cash for treatment meant he'd finally been able to take Dallas to see a new pediatrician. After they'd told him about Dallas's migraines, the first words out of the doctor's mouth were, "This child should *not* have to live like this."

At home that night was the first time I ever saw Devin cry, and it was all relief because someone *finally* took Dallas's condition seriously and they were *finally* going to take steps to *do something* about it.

It was a slow process, but with some trial and error and visits to a few specialists, her new neurologist had put her on one medication that would suppress a migraine when it tried to start (and worked better than the one she'd been on). She also put her on another pill that she took daily, which worked wonders to keep them from starting at all. That second one? Holy shit, talk about a game changer. Dallas could go *weeks* without getting hit with a migraine now. They still happened, but not as often and not as severely. Amazing what a difference it made, just being able to see a decent doctor.

Her doctors still unfortunately recommended against going to hockey games, though we'd been able to take her to some minor league and high school games that were fun to watch but didn't have quite the same sensory overload as one of my games.

Devin's job did mean traveling sometimes to help teams who were trying to set up similar programs, and he'd struggled a little with that at first. He really didn't like being away from Dallas, but especially now that her migraines were under better control, he could handle being away from her more. She stayed with her mom while he was out of town, or—if I wasn't on the road—she'd sometimes stay with me at the house, which the three of us had moved into last year.

That part was still kind of wild to me. I'd had more than a few anxiety attacks over selling my condo (treatment or no treatment, change was terrifying), and Devin hadn't been sure we should move in together quite yet, but all three of us fell in love with the house. We had space. There was no longer an issue with neighbors cooking or burning incense and triggering Dallas's migraines. No more needing to restrict peanuts from an entire building of people.

It wasn't a huge house—not like the ones my teammates had—but it was perfect for us, and I was so glad we'd taken that step. Tony was happy too. Now he had windows overlooking trees and bird feeders, so he could watch birds and harmlessly threaten their lives.

And what Devin had told me about my relationship with Dallas—that she and I could figure out what worked for us instead of me awkwardly stepping into the role of a parent—it had been a game changer. With the pressure off, we'd figured things out on our own. I still gave her skating lessons in between the ones she took every week, and we watched hockey games on TV. Whenever possible, I took her to closed practices since there weren't so many people there. She loved hanging out with the team, and they all adored her. Now that she was solid on her skates, the guys and I had even started teaching her some low-key hockey plays, though Devin would probably prefer that Maddox and I didn't also teach her to chirp. But he let it go because

she kept it on the ice and he'd said with a smile one night that it was obviously "our thing."

These days, we had a few things that had become "our thing," and it turned out some of the stepdad stuff had happened after all. As much as I hadn't been the world's greatest student, I was pretty good at helping her with her homework. I deferred to Devin on disciplinary issues and stayed out of it when they butted heads, but she'd started coming to me when she had trouble with assignments. Sometimes even when I was on the road and she had to FaceTime me, she'd hit me up to walk her through something that was making her struggle. None of us were quite sure why I'd made the cut over her parents and Nick, but it worked, so we all just rolled with it.

Even better, my parents absolutely *adored* Devin and Dallas. They'd all met during the playoffs last season, and we'd taken a trip to visit them during the off season. After years of thinking they'd never be grandparents, my folks were in heaven. They'd finally figured out FaceTime, and spent hours chatting with all three of us. They sent truckloads of presents for Christmas and birthdays—Dallas's, Devin's, and mine—and they were counting down the days until we had a chance to visit again. So were we.

My life was unrecognizable from what it had been before I'd met Devin, and I loved it.

"Hey. Kelly." Coach gave my shoulder a hard smack. "You just going to hang out in here all night?"

I shook myself, and realized that while I'd been reminiscing, the team had started down the chute. "Um. No, Coach. I'm on my way."

Oh fuck. Here we go.

I followed my team out to our bench, and my heart went even wilder.

Devin was in the middle of the ice with a microphone in his hand. He started every game like this with a quick introduction and welcome. Good thing he'd learned to

skate, since it meant coming out onto the ice with a microphone instead of using the booming loudspeakers.

While Devin did his usual intro, I took a deep breath.

“You got nothing to worry about,” Kuznetsov said.

“Damn right.” Maddox gave my shoulder a friendly punch. “You got this, man.”

I smiled despite my racing heart. “Thanks, guys.”

A moment later, Devin wrapped up his spiel. “All right, that’s all I’ve got.” He gestured toward the benches. “How about some hockey?”

The fans applauded, and the two teams again skated out onto the ice.

I took a deep breath, swallowed my nerves, and followed them.

“Hold on a second,” Kuznetsov said into a microphone. “Don’t go anywhere, Devin.”

Devin halted, looking around with wide eyes.

Kuznetsov, Maddox, and I skated toward center ice, and Kuznetsov said, “We’ve got a little surprise for you.”

Devin looked at me. I grinned and shrugged.

Maddox took the microphone from Kuznetsov and cleared his throat. “So, all these nights we’ve been doing for kids who can’t come to regular games? That’s all been because of this guy.” He slung an arm around Devin’s shoulders, nearly knocking him off his skates. “And we thought it was time we gave a little something back to him.”

Devin’s face was the picture of confusion, but then he zeroed in on the bench. In particular, on Dallas, who was now skating out onto the ice with a plaque in her hands. “What’s…”

She beamed as she skated to a perfect stop beside us.

“We’ll keep this short,” Maddox said, “because they’d all rather watch us play hockey than listen to me talk. But Devin McKenzie is the guy who got this whole thing started, and he's done a ton of work to make sure there are

games for *all* of our fans." He clapped Devin's shoulder and gestured at Dallas. "So this is for you, to say thanks."

As the fans in the stands applauded, Devin leaned down and hugged Dallas, and they exchanged a few murmured words I didn't catch. As he rose, he held up the plaque in one hand, and in the mic he was still holding, said, "Thank you all. I really appreciate it." He gave the plaque back to Dallas, who headed for the bench with it. Then he turned to us. "So, um, how about—"

"Um. Actually." I cleared my throat, and I didn't think my heart had ever beat this fast. "There's *one* more thing."

His eyebrows rose.

Maddox held out his microphone. I eyed it warily, but hell, I'd already made it this far. Pretending I wasn't more nervous than I'd ever been in my life, I took off my gloves, handed them to Kuznetsov, and then took the mic from Maddox.

"I, um… I had a big long speech in my head, but I'm pretty sure if I try it, I'm going to screw it up or pass out or something." I laughed nervously. "But the bottom line is…" I reached into my pocket, then carefully knelt on the ice and held up my hand with the ring between my fingers. "I love you, Devin. Will you marry me?"

He stared down at me, wide-eyed and slack-jawed. A few gasps and murmurs rippled through the thin crowd. And then the entire stadium was dead silent.

My heart went even wilder. Oh shit. Was he… Had I timed this wrong? Was he going to say no? Should I have done it privately? Or made it bigger? Or—

Then he laughed and squeezed my hand. "Are you kidding me? Of course I will."

"Yeah?"

He nodded, and relief hit me so hard it was a good thing I was kneeling or I might've stumbled. I managed to get to my feet, though, and Devin wrapped his arms around me

and kissed me, and the fans applauded while both teams cheered.

He drew back a little and looked in my eyes. “Doing that in front of so many people…” He stared at me. “With your anxiety…”

I smiled. “Yeah, it was kind of terrifying. But I didn’t know how else to show you that because of you, I can go out in front of a bunch of people and do something like that. Not just because you helped me get my anxiety under control, but…” I swallowed hard as I held his gaze. “Because you’re worth it. And I wanted you to know I meant it.”

Devin’s lips parted. Then he smiled, held me tighter and kissed me again.

“All right, you two.” Maddox smacked my skate with his stick. “Clear out so we can play some hockey.”

Devin and I both laughed. Hand in hand, we skated toward the bench. My teammates congratulated us, and Dallas practically squealed as she threw her arms around first him, then me.

“I can’t believe you guys are getting married!” she said, still holding on to me. “It’s about time!”

I laughed. “About time? Hey, we didn’t want to rush.”

“Whatever.” She let me go and rolled her eyes, but she was still smiling. “You guys have been practically married from the beginning.”

Devin and I exchanged looks, and we both chuckled. I mean, she wasn’t *wrong*.

“All right, you.” He gave her a gentle nudge. “Go take off your skates. I’ll be there in a minute.”

She was still grinning as she headed up the chute. He watched her go, then looked at me, and his expression was a mix of emotions. Touching my cheek, he said, “I still can’t believe you did it in front of a bunch of people.”

“I wanted to make sure you knew how important it was for me.” I swallowed. “You’re the reason I even started

doing something about my anxiety. You're the reason I got my life back from my own head, and I can do things without freaking myself out anymore." Nodding toward the ice, I added, "I couldn't think of any other way to show you that."

He stared at me in disbelief. "That's… Wow. I don't even know what to say."

"You said the important part." I squeezed his hand. "You said yes."

"Of course I did. And, um, just in case you're second-guessing things and worrying that I only said yes because we were in front of a crowd…" He reached into his pocket with his other hand, and when he brought it back out, he held up a thick silver ring. "I was planning on asking you, but you worked up the courage before I did."

I blinked, eyes flicking back and forth from him to the ring. "Really?"

Smiling, Devin nodded. "Really."

I pulled him close again and kissed him. "I love you."

"I love you too." He brushed his lips across mine, then drew back and gestured at the ice. "Now go play some hockey. We can celebrate after the game."

We shared another long look, a brief kiss, and then he went in to take off his skates.

Heart going wild with relief and excitement, I was smiling like a dork as I picked up my stick and skated toward center ice.

Against a million odds, I'd scored a hat trick and Devin had been there to throw a hat out onto the ice with a note to get my attention, and against even more, that note had been the beginning of a connection I'd never imagined having with anyone.

There'd been a time when all I could hope for was to achieve and hold on to a career as a professional hockey player, and I'd done that.

Somehow, though, I had so, so much more.

I was in love with an awesome man who wanted to marry me. I had an amazing stepdaughter. I was an out gay man whose anxiety was, with each passing day, getting more and more under control. I had so much more than I'd ever even thought to ask for.

And for the rest of my life, I'd be thankful every single day for the hat trick that had brought Devin and Dallas into my world.

The End

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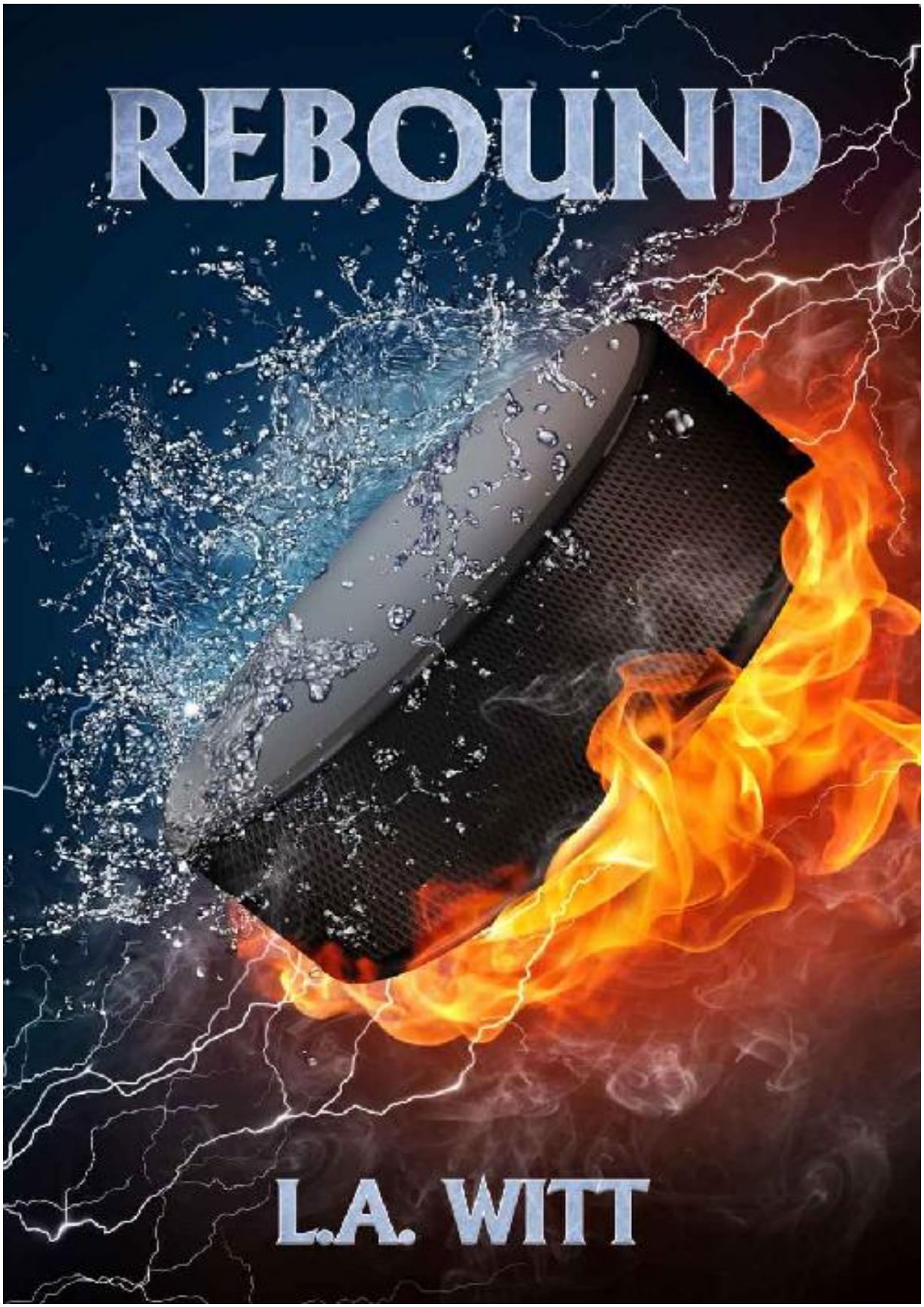
REBOUND
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REBOUND (PUCKS & RAINBOWS #1)

A forty-something single dad, a twenty-something hockey star, and a whole lot of baggage. No, this couldn't possibly blow up in their faces.

Officer Geoff Logan has his plate full. His cop's salary and Marine retirement aren't enough to make ends meet. He's got war wounds and demons that are in it for the long haul. His teenagers are, well, teenagers, plus they're pissed that he left the boyfriend they loved. Can't a guy catch a break?

Seattle Snowhawks center Asher Crowe has it all. A seven figure salary. A literal house on a hill. A stable, loving relationship with an amazing boyfriend. At least, that's what the world sees. Behind closed doors, he's been living in a private hell, and when he finally works up the courage to end things, his boyfriend refuses to go quietly.

One call to the cops, and suddenly Geoff and Asher's paths cross. But is the connection between them simple chemistry? Kindred spirits? Or just a pair of lonely hearts looking for a hot distraction?

And even if it’s more than physical, is there really a future for two men from such vastly different worlds? Especially when the past comes knocking?

This novel is approximately 89,000 words long.

TW: abuse, combat PTSD

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ASSIST
L.A. WITT

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ASSIST (PUCKS & RAINBOWS #2)

A rookie, his teammate, and his best friend from a rival team. What could possibly go wrong?

Seattle Snowhawks rookie Justin Reid has it bad for his teammate Shawn Kelleher. It's just his luck that Shawn's got a crush too… on Justin's best friend, Vancouver Narwhal center Keith Adams.

When Shawn lets it slip at the worst possible moment that he wants Keith, Justin is hurt, but what can he do? He steers Keith in Shawn's direction and lets chemistry do the rest.

What Justin doesn't know is that while Keith is into Shawn, he's also secretly wanted Justin since forever. After some stumbling, they realize there's something very hot and very mutual going on between all three of them. It's fantasies coming true left, right, and center, and it just doesn't get any better than this.

Except this scorching hot triad is anything but simple. Not while the closeted son of a hockey legend is fighting to make his own name in the shadow of his deeply

homophobic father’s legacy. Not in the midst of grueling schedules and a team’s fraternization rules. Throw in pesky emotions showing up where they aren’t wanted, and it’s a play that’s doomed from the start.

Shawn, Keith, and Justin all fought their way into professional hockey. Is what they have together worth fighting for too? Or will fear let heartache win this game?

ASSIST is approximately 117,500 words. It's book 2 of the Pucks & Rainbows series, and can be read as a standalone.

Available on Amazon.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

L.A. Witt and her husband have been exiled from Spain and sent to live in Maine because rhymes are fun. She now divides her time between writing, assuring people she is aware that Maine is cold, wondering where to put her next tattoo, and trying to reason with a surly Maine coon. Rumor has it her arch nemesis, Lauren Gallagher, is also somewhere in the wilds of New England, which is why L.A. is also spending a portion of her time training a team of spec ops lobsters. Authors Ann Gallagher and Lori A. Witt have been asked to assist in lobster training, but they "have books to write" and "need to focus on our careers" and "don't you think this rivalry has gotten a little out of hand?" They're probably just helping Lauren raise her army of squirrels trained to ride moose into battle.

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